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A QUEEN AMONGST WOMEN.

By the author of "The Cost of Her Love," "A Gilded Sin," "Dora Thorne," "From Gloom to Sunlight," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ONE of the earliest scenes that Audrey Brooke remembered in her life was the following. The morning sun was shining brightly into the quaint old-fashioned room that her father, Doctor Fabian Brooke, called his library—a room that would have charmed an artist by its dark rich coloring and artistic furniture. Round the walls were great oaken book-shelves laden with books. The panels were painted in rich deep colors, the hangings were of deep crimson, the carpet was of Indian manufacture; the few pictures were *chef's d'œuvre*, the half-dozen busts were of great merit and value, the whole tone of the room was warm and artistic. The prevailing odor of Spanish leather—fragrant and aromatic—was another charm, but to Audrey Brooke the greatest charm was the large bay-window, filled with soft Turkish cushions, and overlooking one of the most beautiful gardens in England.

Her father had just returned from the church, where he had been marrying two young people, and the book he had used still lay open on the table. She took it in her hands, and read it as she went to her favorite nook, the great bay-window. She laid the book upon a cushion, and bending her fair head over it, studied the words intently. They were the beautiful words of the marriage service, and the sentence that riveted the child's attention was this—"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." She said it over and over again to herself with a critical air, as of one who weighed the words. A hand touched her bowed head and roused her.

"What are you reading, Audrey?" asked her mother.

"The marriage service, mamma. I have never read it before. How beautiful the words are! Listen to this one sentence—'Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.' The words have the rhythm of an old poem."

"They are better than poetry, Audrey—they are truth."

The child raised her thoughtful eyes. Outside the windows stood groups of white Ascen-

sion lilies. Through the rippling foliage of the green trees she saw the lofty gray spire of the church; above that was the clear blue sky.

"But poetry and truth always go together, mamma, do they not?"

"They should, my dear. I cannot say that they do in every case," said Mrs. Brooke.

The girl did not seem to hear the answer—her eyes were riveted on the blue sky. She murmured the solemn words once again to herself—"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

"I shall never forget the words, mamma," she said, "they are so beautiful;" and henceforward, in her mind, the gray church spire, the green foliage and the white Ascension lilies were all associated with a sentence which seemed to her more solemn than any she had ever heard.

Holmesdale was a picturesque spot. The town of Holmesdale stood at the foot of a wooded hill. The river Dale—a broad stream, with deep green banks—ran through the town; the houses clustered on either side; the great dark masses of the Holme woods rose on the left, and on the right lay miles of green pasture-land.

The church stood half-way up the hill, and was surrounded by tall trees. It was a church with arched windows overhung with ivy, and with a tall, tapering spire. The rectory was built near it, on the southern side of the hill, and was a pretty, quaint old house half-hidden by flowers.

There lived Doctor Fabian Brooke, one of the greatest scholars, and one of the simplest men in England—a man wise yet simple, learned yet humble, full of deep religious faith, and showing it in a good life.

He was rector of Holmesdale. No one ever referred to him as a miracle of eloquence—he preached no new doctrine, he took no part in the somewhat acrid discussions of the day, he startled no one by innovations of any kind; but it was a fact that the people of Holmesdale under his charge lived good lives and died happy deaths, that they were honest, sober, moral and charitable.

He was as firm as a rock in all matters of right and wrong, yet he was so kind, so merciful, so gentle in his judgments, that charity lived in his parish and amongst all the people with whom he had to deal.

His wife Isabel was a gentle, kindly woman, whose life had but one end—obedience to her husband. Audrey, his daughter and only child, completed the little household, and had far more depths of character than any one else in it.

It was a wonderful household, and a most sensible one. Religion was not made hideous with either cant or severity; it was made beautiful, graceful, attractive.

The Brookes did not confound the sin and the sinner; they never glossed over wickedness, nor made light of it, nor pretended that anything could excuse it. They gave to every sin its proper name.

Doctor Brooke never stood by calmly while the poor man who had stolen bread for his starving children and the rich swindler who had robbed thousands were classed together.

He never listened quietly while the follies and faults of a friendless, penniless girl were discussed without mercy and the "fast" follies of a "fine lady" smiled at and called eccentricities; he called sin by its right name. But, while he was hard upon sin, he was most merciful to the sinner.

Whatever the troubles, sorrows or sins of his parishioners, they had but to go to him, and he had comfort for all. He could be influenced and persuaded; but no creature living could make him call wrong right, or yield to what he knew was wrong.

In the midst of this household Audrey Brooke grew up beautiful as a rose, pure as a white lily, bright, sensible, and intelligent.

She was just eighteen; and it would have been difficult to find a more sweet, gifted, graceful girl. Refinement shone in her face; truth, purity, candor shone there too.

Hers was a type of beauty. She had large, dark eyes—dark, soft and full of poetry, with long, dark lashes and

clear straight brows; a broad, beautiful forehead, full of ideality, with rounded temples.

The scarlet mouth was the only feature in Audrey's face about which one was not quite sure. It was lovely enough—the curves of the sweet lips were perfect; but, while the eyes might have been those of a pictured saint or angel, the lips could have belonged only to a beautiful woman.

They had a quick, humorous smile; there was at times a touch of satire in the play of them; yet never were lips truer or purer. The crown of this fair young loveliness was a wealth of dark brown hair that was full of natural ripples and waves.

The mind was to the full as beautiful as the body. Audrey had inherited her father's keen sense of right and wrong, his passionate sense of honor, his calm, clear unerring judgment, his shrewd common sense, his rectitude.

She had been most carefully watched and trained; she knew nothing of evil; she knew less of the wickedness of the world than many a precocious child of ten; she was singularly innocent and simple.

To her mind sin stood out in black startling colors—a thing to be avoided, shunned, hated, but never compromised with.

It was one of Mrs. Brooke's ideas that her daughter should not read the newspapers.

"They are filled with murders and those horrible divorce cases," she said to her husband. "I would rather she did not see them."

He yielded where he half doubted the prudence of doing so; and so it happened that the white leaves of the Ascension lilies were not purer than this bright and beautiful young soul.

The first great change that came to Audrey Brooke was a visit that she paid to a distant relative of her mother's—Mrs. Calverne, a wealthy and fashionable widow, who had a beautiful villa at Richmond, and considered life fifty miles from London quite unendurable.

A matter of business had taken Mrs. Calverne into that part of the world where the Brookes resided. She had called on them as a matter of duty, and had found herself taken by surprise and made captive by the sweetness of Audrey. She thought in her heart that it was a great waste of life and beauty for the girl to live always in the quiet Rectory, doing nothing but read and study, and visit old women—a great waste of beauty, she imagined. If Audrey Brooke went into society, there would be no limit to her triumphs, no bounds to her success.

"She will have no fortune, of course, or very little," said Mrs. Calverne to herself; "but with such a lovely face she does not need money."

The fashionable widow was discreet enough not to give expression to her thoughts; she understood perfectly the simple unworldly character of the people with whom she had to deal. To have talked to them of Audrey's beauty, of her chances of a splendid marriage, of the *furore* she would excite in society, would have been a sure way to prevent their allowing her young kinswoman to visit her.

She was wise and wary enough to be quite silent about these things, and to affect great interest in parish-work. She had not quite decided in her own mind whether Audrey was content with her life or not. It seemed to Mrs. Calverne that no girl could be really happy without balls, parties, dresses, jewels and, above all, admirers.

She had been loitering in the Rectory garden one morning trying to settle this question in her mind, when she saw Audrey dressed for walking.

"Where are you going?" she asked eagerly.

Half shyly Audrey opened her arms and showed her a pretty wax doll dressed with much skill.

"I am going to make one or two sick-calls," she answered—"first to take this to little Jennie Hurst, a child who has been dying, the doctors say, for three weeks past, and then I am going to a Mrs. Matthews."

Mrs. Calverne looked at the girl's superb face.

"Audrey," she said gravely, "is it possible that you care for this kind of thing—really care, I mean?"

The girl opened her bright eyes widely.

"Care for my poor people and the little children?" she replied. "Most decidedly I do."

"I understand the philosophy of resignation," said Mrs. Calverne, "and how wise it is to make the best of our lives; but I cannot think how a girl so young and—forgive me—so beautiful, Audrey, can be content with such an existence."

"I do not see what being beautiful has to do with it," rejoined Audrey. "My presence simply cheers the little ones, the aged, and the sick. That is all."

"She is quite ignorant of the value of her own face," thought Mrs. Calverne—"that is quite evident. Shall I walk with you, Audrey?" she asked aloud.

Miss Brooke was only too pleased; she liked the pleasant woman of fashion, whose ideas on every point differed so greatly from her own. They set out together, and Mrs. Calverne waited patiently outside the cottages while Audrey went in. Then they walked up the hill, past the church, and Mrs. Calverne, who was a devout worshipper of beauty in every form and shape, uttered a little cry when she saw the tall, tapering spire.

"And those trees, Audrey—how beautiful they are! What do you call them? Aspens? Why, they are never still; they seem to tremble all over. How strange! Are all aspen-trees alike?"

"I should imagine so," replied Audrey.

"I like that perpetual tremor of leaves. Let us sit still and watch them."

It was pleasant to watch the blue sky above the gray church, pleasant to watch the green boughs of the trembling aspens, the bright sunlight lying around.

"I shall never forget those aspens," said Mrs. Calverne. "How tall and straight they are! But, Audrey, they tremble as though some one were striking them."

Audrey raised her dark eyes to the pleasant face.

"Have you never read the legend of the aspen-tree?" she asked. "One of our best poets has put it into verse."

"No, I have never even heard of it," replied the widow, shading her face from the sun. "What is it? Legends are not much in my line."

"But this is so pretty and quaint that a master of words has written a beautiful poem on it. The legend is this, that from all the other trees the aspen was chosen to provide the wood for the cross, and that ever since then it has never ceased trembling with horror of what was done."

"It is pretty," said Mrs. Calverne; "but then of course it is not true."

"I have thought about that."

"Audrey," said the widow, after a short time, "do you know that you are not in the least like other girls? Of course what you have told me is very pretty and all that sort of thing, but I should hardly advise you to get into the habit of talking in that fashion."

"In what fashion?" asked Audrey, startled.

"About religion; of course it is all very well, but well-bred people, as a rule, are silent about it. Really, if you wish to win success in society, you must banish all such topics."

"That would be very wise," said Audrey, with the little curl of the lip that her friend had yet to understand. "I merely told you a legend. I did not speak of religion."

"But you speak as though you were full of it. Audrey, I want you to pay me a long visit at Richmond. Will you?"

"I should like it very much," said Audrey, frankly. "I am eighteen years of age, and have never been away from Holmesdale yet."

"My poor child! I call that positive cruelty," cried Mrs. Calverne. "And yet I envy your having so much to see, to hear, and to understand. You will enjoy yourself very much, I am sure. I keep open house, and am never with-

out three or four young people staying with me—really nice people, too, whose society you will enjoy."

That same evening Mrs. Calverne asked whether Audrey might pay the proposed visit, and the Rector would not give a decided answer, but he promised to think the matter over and to consult his wife. The result of the consultation was that Audrey might go and remain for a month.

She was delighted at the prospect. The Rector gave her a cheque which he fancied would cover the expenses of her journey and all needful purchases. Mrs. Brooke had been very anxious to send for the Holmesdale milliner, a lady of great repute, but Mrs. Calverne had shuddered at the thought.

"It will be better for Audrey to have her dresses made in London," she said; "I can superintend them there."

She smiled when Audrey, full of glee, came to her and showed her the cheque—smiled with the superiority of greater knowledge. She knew that the whole amount would not purchase two dresses of the description that she intended her beautiful young kinswoman to wear.

So the morning came when Audrey bid adieu to her pleasant home and loving parents. She was silent, filled with a thousand wonders as to what the new world she was going to would be like. It would be quite a new sphere to her—its ways, its manners, its precepts, its teachings, its virtues and follies; no child could have known less about the great world than did this girl of eighteen, who had been trained in all simplicity and unworldliness.

With a sigh of relief Mrs. Calverne threw herself back in the traveling carriage. She had enjoyed her visit after a fashion, but life in a country rectory was not at all suited to her taste.

"You will think my house a vortex of dissipation, Audrey, I am afraid," said Mrs. Calverne. "I am never alone; solitude and I are sworn enemies. I like bright faces about me; I like plenty of excitement—music, parties, balls, *fêtes*. I think life was given us to enjoy, and I endeavor to obtain my share. We shall have one quiet night; then will come a host of visitors. You will like them all; but there is one whom I should like you to make a friend of—Bertha Hamlyn. She is a brunette. Some people call her a beauty; I think she is picturesque. But she is a terrible flirt."

"A flirt?" questioned Audrey. "That is something very bad, is it not?"

"Some people find the character very pleasant," said Mrs. Calverne. "The conduct of such persons means nothing really wrong—only playing at love."

The beautiful dark eyes opened brightly.

"How strange—playing at love! And your friend Miss Hamlyn does this well?"

"She does indeed," replied the widow, with a quiet laugh. "You will like her; she is full of life and animation. She has a large fortune, too, and will be sure to marry well."

Audrey's eyes opened more brightly still when she saw the beautiful mansion on the banks of the Thames which Mrs. Calverne called home. In her simple life she had seen nothing like it; it seemed to her a very palace of grandeur.

Mrs. Calverne was a charming hostess. She herself conducted Audrey to her room—a pretty apartment, hung with blue silk and white lace.

The long windows looked over the grounds that led to the river, presenting a most exquisite view. In the room there was everything that a girl's heart could desire. The toilet-table was covered with marvels of glass, Dresden china, and ivory, and with most elaborate scent-bottles. A pretty couch was drawn near the window. There were books, flowers, pictures, statuettes.

Audrey looked round in wonder. This was magnificent compared with the plain bare aspect of her room at the Rectory.

"I hope you will spend happy hours here," said Mrs. Calverne.

Audrey was delighted with the size, the magnificence,

the picturesque beauty of the house. She was delighted too, on the day following, when Mrs. Calverne—who was almost royally generous in her liberality—took her out shopping.

To Audrey's simple imagination her hundred pounds seemed almost inexhaustible. It bought so much—everything that a young lady could desire.

There was nothing forgotten—evening-dresses, ball-dresses, walking-costumes, gloves, fans, Parisian shoes, pretty ornaments—yet in the purse Mrs. Calverne handed to her there was left a handsome supply of gold.

"A hundred pounds goes a very long way," said Audrey thoughtfully.

She was well pleased; and on the morrow, when Mrs. Calverne's friends and visitors arrived, she felt quite at home and at her ease amongst them.

Miss Hamlyn gave one keen, comprehensive glance at Audrey when they were introduced, and then she smiled at Mrs. Calverne.

"We shall hear of something before very long," she said.

That same evening Mrs. Calverne seemed highly delighted with a note that she had received.

"Sir Roche Villiers is coming," she said. "I hardly hoped to see him."

Miss Hamlyn looked up with a gleam of pleasure in her dark eyes.

"Coming here, is he? I have been given to understand that he is most difficult to please. I repeat my prophecy—we shall hear of something before very long."

Mrs. Calverne made no answer; she was looking at Audrey with an intent, serious gaze. She shook her head slightly.

"I am afraid it will hardly do," she thought to herself; "yet few girls have ever had such a chance."

Before three days had elapsed the party of guests was complete, and they had before them the prospect of a beautiful month—July, in all its glory of flower and leaf.

CHAPTER II.

THE London season had almost come to an end, and the participants in it had nearly all gone their different ways. For some the season had ended in the chime of wedding-bells; to others it had brought regrets and disappointment.

One who had been perhaps more brilliant, more popular, more sought after and admired than any other sat alone in his house near Hyde Park. The table before him was strewn with notes of invitation, with dainty envelopes, with papers still unread, periodicals still uncut; the warm sunlight fell upon his face, which was shaded by his hand—a face that at once attracted attention.

There was something at once brilliant, gentle, and strong about this man. Looking at him, one saw by the handsome, thoughtful face that his breast held a life-story. It was half revealed by the firm, grave mouth; the lips looked as though they had sealed a secret; it was told in the dark keen blue eyes, in the whole expression of the face. He was above the ordinary height, with strength and grace combined—a man who could never have even passed through a room unnoticed.

Most men envied, all women admired, Sir Roche Villiers. He was rich; he owned a magnificent estate—Rowan Abbey; he possessed a magnificent mansion in London, called Roche House, he had a villa at Cowes, a large estate in Wales. His baronetcy was one of the oldest in England. Fortune had lavished some of her richest gifts on him.

He had a fine, clear, keen intellect, a brilliant, vivid fancy, the soul of a poet, the mind, the taste and instinct of an artist; he was a brilliant orator, an accomplished courtier.

He was one of the leading members of the House of Commons, and was a power in the land, although he had not yet reached the age of thirty.

He was sought after, flattered, and admired; no one had

a word to say against him. And he won the love of women by the eloquent beauty of his face, as well as by his marvellous talent, tact, grace, and wit.

The room in which he sat was spacious and handsome. The hangings were of amber and black; the walls were hung with works by the old masters; the corners and niches held copies of the world's most famous statues.

The sunbeams lingered on a thousand beautiful things, but those same sunbeams brought no smile to the face of the man to whom everything brought only weariness. He put away his thoughts and gave the whole of his attention to the letters lying on the table.

One after another he read them, and wrote on each the same word "declined," until he came to Mrs. Calverne's letter.

"I will go there—I always enjoy a visit to Richmond."

He wrote an acceptance—it was the same letter which gave such delight to the fashionable widow—and then the old air of weariness and gloom came over him.

"I wonder," said Sir Roche Villiers, the possessor of thirty thousand per annum, "if there is anything in this world which would make me feel like my old self again, light of heart, hopeful, trustful, sanguine.

Could anything give me a desire for life, take from me the rankling sense of ill-usage, restore my faith in my kind, in the love and the truth of women, the honor of men. I would give my fortune for them, and consent to stand penniless in the world if I could regain what I have lost. Why should my heart have lost its youth, my life its spring? Other men are happy till they die—I was happy for only a few short months."

He rose hurriedly; he walked with rapid steps up and down the room; he clenched his strong hands.

"I would give all that I have," he cried, "for one draught of the waters of Lethe, my whole fortune for one hour of forgetfulness; the exchange would make me a happy man."

Peace did not come to him, nor did rest or forgetfulness.

The day arrived on which he left his home and went to Richmond, where a warm welcome from the graceful widow awaited him.

He never forgot the day. It was rich and warm with the glory of July. The river lay gleaming in the sun. The banks were rich in color, the trees luxuriant in foliage. The beautiful, cheerful house, with its long bright windows, its balconies all filled with flowers, its pretty fountains, green sweep of lawn, and stately trees, brought no smile to his lips.

Mrs. Calverne received him with the graceful warmth that made her so popular; she said kind, pleasant things to him; she hoped a few days of change, rest, and bright companionship would do him good.

He thanked her; but when, after a short conversation, she went away to order some luncheon for him, he walked to the window and stood looking absently over the green lawn with its wealth of rose-trees.

Mrs. Calverne's return aroused him. He knew that he had the usual society routine to go through. While he drank the claret-cup so perfectly prepared, and admired the cool, tempting fruit set before him, he asked who were his fellow guests. Mrs. Calverne answered brightly that they formed a pleasant and well-selected party.

"I have a belle, a beauty, an *ingenue*, a wit, and yourself. Could anything be better?"

"No," he answered, with a smile.

"When you have rested a little and care to go out, you will find them all in the grounds. Miss Hamlyn and Miss Brooke like the bank of the river. I think you will be pleased with Miss Brooke; she is something quite fresh."

He raised the eyebrows a little—as though anything in this weary world could be fresh to him! He forgot all about Miss Brooke the next moment, and, enjoying his cigar in peace, he presently strolled down to the river-bank. Then and there he saw the Rector's daughter. He had prayed only a few hours before for forgetfulness; now he

hoped that no time, no thought, no trouble, no sorrow would ever take this new memory from him.

He bore the picture with him until the day he died. The tall, slender girl standing idly by the river-bank watching the stream, every line and curve of her figure clearly defined against the blue sky, her two white hands idly clasped, was as perfect a picture as artist or poet could suggest.

A smile, half thoughtful, half proud, played round her lips. Her sweet loveliness revealed no trace of human passion, there was nothing to mar the calmness of girlhood. It was quite a new type of beauty to him, rich in its brilliant coloring, proud in its half-haughty grace, pure in its dreamy loveliness.

He stood quite still, as a man who sees some wonder of the world for the first time, spell-bound by the beautiful purity of the unconscious face. What happened as he watched it he never quite knew; the sun took a more golden gleam, the river seemed to flash into light and song, a deeper green fell on the rippling leaves, sweeter fragrance came to the flowers.

As he looked at Audrey his life seemed to grow complete; something awoke in his heart and soul that never died again, something that gave him back his youth, his faith, his trust—that took away his doubts, fears, and dismay. He watched her intently while the moments passed unheeded, and then he murmured to himself that he had found the spring of the waters of Lethe at last. He roused himself suddenly as from a sweet sleep.

He was obliged to pass by the spot where she stood, for he saw Miss Hamlyn in the distance. As he drew near, the girl raised her face and their eyes met, only for a moment, but that same moment held the fate of two souls. He hurried on, and found Miss Hamlyn noting the capabilities of the smooth green croquet-ground. When he spoke to her, he had the look and manners of a man who was dreaming.

"He speaks to me," she thought, "but he does not even see me;" and then he asked the question that trembled on his lips.

"Who is that lady standing on the river-bank, Miss Hamlyn?"

There was a demure smile in her eyes as she raised them to his.

"That is Miss Brooke, Audrey Brooke—or *l'ingénue*, as Mrs. Calverne calls her."

"Audrey Brooke," he repeated slowly, and to his excited fancy it seemed that the surging wavelets re-echoed the name. "Audrey Brooke," he said again, and Miss Hamlyn smiled with the superiority of a young lady quite above such weakness as love.

"I will introduce you to her, if you like," she said.

Mechanically he followed her, and in a few moments he was bowing while a fair face was raised to his—raised for one moment, and then the dark eyes fell. It seemed to them both that in that one glance their souls had met.

"There will be something worth talking about before very long," said Miss Hamlyn to herself; and the words came most unfortunately true.

CHAPTER III.

"AFTER all, you know, my dear, that such notions are old-fashioned; the world of our day laughs at them. They are very well to teach to the poor, but for us they are old-fashioned."

So spoke Mrs. Calverne; and Miss Hamlyn, listening, said laughingly:

"The day will come, I believe, when honor, truth, and religion, in their rigid aspects, will be pronounced old-fashioned;" and the elder lady with a complacent smile answered:

"Still there must always be some kind of check for the lower classes."

Mrs. Calverne did not distinguish the ring of satire in

the girl's laugh. Bertha Hamlyn was generally quite honest in her opinions. She said to herself now that, if there were as much sin and irreligion in the lower as in the higher classes, nothing but a new deluge could purify the world. Mrs. Calverne was equally sincere in her belief that that which was a sin in a poor man was merely an eccentricity in a wealthy one, and that Heaven, while it judged severely the sins and the shortcomings of the poor, smiled with compassion on the same faults in the rich.

The two ladies had been talking very seriously, for on the lawn before them was a tableau that none could mistake.

A time-worn sun-dial stood apart from the trees, and bending over it, watching intently the lines and marks, were Audrey and Sir Roche Villiers. They might disguise it as they would; they might talk of the sun-dials and listen to the birds; they might seem to be engrossed with the river or the far-off hills; the truth was plain enough—they saw, heard, understood nothing on earth but each other.

Neither of them could have told when or where or how they had begun to love each other; neither could realize that time had been when they were strangers. Suddenly, subtly, with all sweet, vague unconsciousness, the two lives seemed to have become one, and they were ignorant of it. No words of love had been spoken; they were in dream-land—the dream-land of lovers.

But others saw that of which they were quite unconscious. Miss Hamlyn had noticed them, and on this fair summer day had spoken to Mrs. Calverne. That lady was somewhat disconcerted at first. Bertha looked at her in undisguised wonder.

"Surely," she said, "you could not have desired a better match for your *protegee*. Sir Roche must be one of the richest baronets in England. Many a lord would be thankful for his income."

"It is not that," returned the mistress of River View. "Audrey is not like other girls; her parents are not like other people. Altogether I am puzzled about it."

"I should not feel very much puzzled if Sir Roche asked me to be his wife," remarked Bertha. "I should not lose much time in saying 'Yes'; nor would any girl possessed of common sense. Take my advice, Mrs. Calverne, and say nothing; let matters take their course. That is what I advise."

"But suppose, Bertha, that her parents blame me afterwards, what then?"

"Blame you for helping to make their daughter Lady Villiers of Rowan Abbey! Never fear. I have often noticed that those whom the world calls religious are wide awake to their own interests. Believe me, Doctor Brooke will be much pleased if his daughter makes a grand marriage." And then followed the conversation about old-fashioned ideas.

"Even if you would interfere," said Miss Hamlyn, after a time, "it is too late. Look at Sir Roche. Do you think that he sees the sky above him, or the earth beneath his feet, or anything else except that most fair and lovely young face? You might as well try to stop the tide as try to check the love which has come to them both." And looking at them, Mrs. Calverne felt that Bertha Hamlyn was right.

Sir Roche could not explain the beginning of his love for Audrey. A new beautiful life had suddenly sprung up within him; flowers bloomed where an arid desert had been; the funeral pall which had covered earth and sky fell away; he who had thirsted so long drank deep of the sweet waters of content. He could not tell what there was in Audrey that he loved so entirely. It was not only her fair and lovely youth—for, had she been blind, maimed, disfigured, he felt that he would have loved her just the same.

He had been under many influences during his life, but this was the first influence of a thoroughly refined religious nature. Like many young men, he had thought of religion as a very comfortable thing for old people, and indeed as perhaps a necessity when one came to die; but

that religion should make sunshine and brightness, should co-exist with bright eyes, a lovely face, a happy light heart, had never occurred to him.

The first time that he was struck by the fact was one morning when the whole party went out riding, and Audrey, lingering in one of the green lanes, found the white gate that led to the high-road closed.

A laboring-man—tall, strong, and young—was passing, and civilly enough opened it for her; but as he opened it a nail or splinter ran into his hand, and caused him great pain.

She reined in her horse, and kept quite still while he poured out a volley of abuse so coarse that her fair face grew pale; then, with a quiet dignity all her own, she called the man to her side.

She held out a dainty white handkerchief to bind the wound, and with her clear dark eyes she looked into the rugged sunburnt face.

"I am sorry you have hurt yourself," she said slowly, "but I am still more sorry that you should have given way to such wicked speech. Did it relieve the pain?"

"No," was the wondering answer.

"Because a nail or splinter has hurt you, is that any reason why you should immediately offend the Being who has made all this fair earth for you?"

"He made little enough of it for me," was the surly reply. "It seems to have been made for my betters."

"It is made as much for you as for anyone. Is it needful to offend the great Creator because you have wounded your hand?"

Sir Roche heard her add a few words of what seemed to him sweetest wisdom, and then she rode on, leaving one man the better for a word in season.

The baronet looked after her, and the thought came to him, "What a different world it would be if there were more in it like her!"

He watched her that evening. She danced and sang no less blithely because she had preached a little sermon in the morning. Altogether she puzzled him.

He saw that she was most thoroughly under the dominion of conscience—that, if she believed a thing was wrong, nothing could induce her to sanction it—that, if she thought anything right, she would do it, let the cost be what it might.

"I believe," he said to her one day, "that you would rather suffer death than do what you believe to be wrong."

She was silent for a few moments, and then with a smile she raised her fair face to his.

"Yes," she replied, "I hope I should. Life is very pleasant, but I for one would never purchase it by an act of wrong-doing."

"I wish I had known you years ago," he said sadly; and she, smiling at the thought of a wealthy baronet saying this to a poor rector's daughter, asked:

"Why, Sir Roche?"

"Because all my life I have pleased myself; my own will and pleasure have been my conscience and my rule for guidance. Right and wrong have been yours."

The fair face clouded. She did not like to think that he had ever been guided by pleasure or self-will.

"Would that I had known you earlier!" he said. And she, all unconscious of how much her words meant, returned:

"That cannot be helped. But you know me now."

"Yes," he answered sadly, "I know you now."

And she wondered why he should sigh about it.

Their souls were drawn together. Neither of them tried to resist the sweet, subtle influence which, growing on them day by day, seemed to enfold them and keep them apart from the rest of the world. To Audrey it seemed that the bountiful heavens had crowned her with a new and more beautiful life, everything was so sweet, so bright, so changed.

CHAPTER IV.

SIR ROCHE VILLIERS told Audrey that he loved her and asked her to be his wife. He could not recall the words in which he had proposed to her or the manner in which she had accepted him. He remembered the sunlight of the summer morning, the fragrance, the shade under the tall green trees, the humming of the bees.

He had not slept all night for thinking of her—he had risen early. He saw her at breakfast time, looking more beautiful than ever, in a cool, blue muslin dress with white lace. He had tried hard to be content and persuade himself that he had no right to seek to make that pure young life one with his. "Yet why not?" he asked himself. "Shall a man suffer all his life, and lose all his life, because of one mistake?"

He tried to find a chance of speaking to her when breakfast was over and the visitors, in little groups, were discussing their letters and plans for the day. He had no opportunity just then; but, on going down to the river-bank shortly afterwards, he caught a glimpse of the brown hair and the blue dress under the shade of a lime-tree.

He did not wait then to ask himself any questions, to review past scruples; he said to himself that she was the good angel of his life, and that he would do his best to make her his own. He went to her at once, his heart on his lips—he loved her with a wonderful love—and he asked her if she would be his wife.

To neither of them did the memory of that time ever return very clearly—it was all a blinding glare of golden sunlight, a sound of sweet music. When she raised her fair startled face to his, he knew that he had won her, for he read her love in the dark eyes that drooped so shyly from his. Yet his happiness was so great that he could hardly believe it.

"You will really be my wife, Audrey?" he said. "Say it again, darling—it seems to me so much too good to be true. You always appear to me more than mortal; I can hardly believe that I have won you. You really love me, Audrey?"

"Yes, I really love you," she replied.

"And you will be true to me until death," he continued. She raised her pure fair face to his.

"Yes," she answered, "in the highest sense of the words, I will be true to you until death."

"I feel as though I had plighted my troth to an angel!" he said. "My darling, I should never be very surprised to see you suddenly take wings and fly away."

She laughed a little sweet laugh of perfect content.

"I feel more like a happy young girl than an angel," she said.

"But are you happy, darling?" he asked.

"Yes," was the half-frank, half-shy answer, "I am happy;" and then they talk of the future that lay so bright before them.

He told her of his splendid old home, Rowan Abbey, the large estate near King's Wynne, of his numerous tenants and dependents.

"I have neglected my home," he said—"it is three years and more since the great gates of the Abbey were opened. They tell me that moss has grown in the courts and weeds in the gardens."

"But why," she asked, "have you neglected it?"

His handsome face grew dark and moody.

"Do not ask me," he said. "My past has not been a happy one. I will tell you this, darling—I have neglected my duties. I have not been near my home; I have neglected my tenants; I have taken no interest in anything."

"But why," she persisted—"tell me why?"

He was silent for a few minutes, during which he asked himself—Should he tell her, or should he not? If he told her, the chances were that he should lose her; and he clung to her not only because he loved her with a passionate love, but because he saw in her the means of amendment, saw how she could help him to lead such a life as he had dreamed of years before and had longed for always.

He could not risk all by telling her; besides, what could it matter? He would be a true, faithful, loving husband to her—he would make her very happy; for the rest, his story related only to an old-fashioned prejudice, at which the wise children of this generation laughed.

"Why was all this?" she asked gently. "Why did you neglect everything and care for nothing, Sir Roche?"

"Darling, you must not call me 'Sir Roche.' I have never known the beauty of my name until now. Say 'Roche,' that I may hear all the music of it."

She half whispered the name, and then he answered her. He took both her hands in his and kissed them, but he did not look into her face as he said:

"I had a friend, one whom I loved and trusted. This friend deceived and betrayed me. The deceit was so cruel, it blighted my life and I lost all interest in it until I saw you."

Her hand stole gently to his shoulder, her dark eyes, dim with unshed tears, were raised lovingly to his.

"I will never deceive nor betray you," she said. "You shall have one love true and faithful to your life's end; I will make up to you for all you have suffered. But, Roche, you must have loved your friend very dearly to have suffered so much?"

"I did," he replied hoarsely. "But we will not talk any more about it. I shall forget it in your love. My life will grow bright again—all the interest will come back. We will live at Rowan Abbey, and we will do all that I ought to have done, but have so sadly neglected; we will build schools for the children, almshouses for the old and infirm. We will do all the good we can, Audrey."

She listened to him in a trance of delight.

"That is the life I have always longed for," she said. "You must have guessed it, Roche."

She lost all her shyness then, and talked to him with the happy abandonment of a child. How many churches she built, how many poor and sorrowful she made rich and happy, how many wearied and heavily burdened she made bright and glad, as she sat under the shade of the lime-tree only Heaven knew.

"And all this is no dream," said Sir Roche; "it can all be done. Living, I shall lead a noble, useful life, filled with good deeds; dying, I shall leave behind me a fair name. Is not this better than living for nothing and dying uncared for, Audrey?"

"Undoubtedly," she answered. "There can be no question about it."

"It is better that I should marry you, Audrey, and that we should do all this good, than that we should both be unhappy all our lives—is it not?"

"Most certainly," she answered.

"Heaven will bless our marriage, Audrey," he said. "And now, my darling, we need not surely wait long? When shall I go and see your father, to ask him for his treasure?"

She looked at him in dismay.

"Not yet," she said—"surely not yet, Roche?"

He looked at her with pleading wistfulness.

"I am frightened, Audrey," he said. "I am afraid of losing you. You are so precious to me that it seems to me if I wait for long months or weeks I shall lose you."

"But how could you lose me, Roche?" she asked.

"People would get talking—" He stopped abruptly.

"As if that would matter!" she said laughingly.

"I have read so often of misunderstandings and separations that I am not willing to run any risk. Audrey, you love me, you have promised to be my wife—can't matter how soon that promise is fulfilled? I shall know no peace by night or by day until I have made you my own."

"I am going home next week," she said gently.

"Then I shall follow you," he declared; and she made no further resistance. He was to follow her home.

He saw her again that evening, looking more than beautiful in white silk and crimson roses. He asked himself

if it could be possible that he had won the love of one so lovely, so pure, so good.

"Heaven helping me, I will be worthy of her," he said. "I will lead such a life that hers shall be the crown of it. I did right not to tell her of the past. It would have done no good, and I might have lost her. Great Heaven, what should I do if I lost her?"

Yet, considering his vast wealth, his ancient title, his large estates, he did not look like a lover assured of victory when he asked that same evening to speak to Mrs. Calverne.

"I think it but right," he said, "as Miss Brooke is staying under your roof, to tell you that I have asked her to be my wife, and that I have decided on going to see Doctor Brooke next week."

She looked at him half gravely, half sadly.

"You do not congratulate me!" he cried.

"I am remiss," she said; "I beg your pardon. I do congratulate you. I think more highly of Audrey Brooke than of any girl I know."

"You are recalling those old-fashioned prejudices," he said impatiently; "surely you are more enlightened than to deem them worth a moment's thought?"

She shivered a little, and drew her white lace shawl round her shoulders.

"Have you told her?" she asked.

"No," he replied, angrily; "why need I tell her? She need never know. I dare not risk losing her, for if I lost her it would drive me mad."

"Will you tell Doctor Brooke?" asked Mrs. Calverne, after a pause.

"No; why should I? Why need I? It matters to no one. Let me forget it—that terrible ghost of a hated past; let me be good and happy with this pure angel—sent to me, I believe, by Heaven to save me from utter destruction."

"Do you think good ever comes from concealment?" asked Mrs. Calverne presently.

"No, not as a rule—in this case—yes. Old-fashioned prejudices would be arrayed against new and more advanced ideas. I do not see the need, the wisdom, the advisability of referring to days gone by. Wish me happiness—wish me God-speed in my journey."

"I do," she said.

But long after he had left her the mistress of River View sat looking thoughtfully at the green trees.

"I hope I have done right," she said. "After all, it is a brilliant match for her; and what can a few old-fashioned prejudices matter?"

CHAPTER V.

"MAMMA," said Audrey, "I do not know what you will say, but I have a secret. Mrs. Calverne wanted to write and tell you about it, but I begged of her to wait until I had seen you and told you myself."

It was a glorious evening, and Audrey had just returned home from her visit to River View, to the intense delight of both her parents, who had found the Rectory without Audrey very dull indeed.

There was nothing said during the drive from the station, but Mrs. Brooke, looking at her beautiful child, thought her much improved; there was a deeper light in the dark eyes, new loveliness on the fair young face. When Audrey went to change her dress, Mrs. Brooke, with something like a mist of tears in her eyes, turned to her husband.

"You see, Fabian, I was right. Our child has been away from us, in the very midst of the gay world we both dreaded, and she has come back to us as simple, as pure of heart, as innocent of soul as she was when she left."

Having said this, it was somewhat of a surprise to Mrs. Brooke when her daughter came to her with the frank and candid intelligence, "Mamma, I have a secret." Some girls would have hidden such a matter, would have waited until the lover himself came to tell the story—not so Audrey.

She could not keep a secret from her mother; she was so

open, so candid, so transparent, that everything must be clear and above-board. She could not have lived in an atmosphere of secrecy, mystery, or intrigue. Truth was as needful to her as fresh air; falsehood would have destroyed her as a pestilence would have done.

"I have a secret," she repeated—"a gentleman is coming to see you next week—and I love him every much."

"My dearest child!" cried Mrs. Brooke, half dismayed, half amused.

Audrey nodded her head with charming gravity.

"It is quite true, mamma. I do not wonder that you are surprised; I am astonished at myself. I have never thought about romance, and now it seems to me that I have never lived at all until I loved Roche; and if I lived a hundred years I should never love anyone else."

"My dearest Audrey," cried the Rector's lady, "who is it? I cannot realize it! You were but a child when you left me."

"I know I was a child when he spoke to me first. While he was speaking to me a new soul, a woman's soul, seemed to come to me."

"But, my dear child, who is he?" asked the anxious lady.

"Sir Roche Villiers of Rowan Abbey. I am sure you will like him, he is so handsome, clever and good."

"Sir Roche Villiers!" repeated the wondering lady, as she rose from her couch. "Do you mean what you are saying, Audrey?"

One look at the sweet, pure face reassured her; there was no pride, no vanity, no self-satisfaction there. The fact that her lover was wealthy and a man of title did not seem to have occurred to her. She remembered only that she loved him.

Mrs. Brooke repeated the name.

"Sir Roche Villiers! Audrey, how has it come about? He must move in quite a different sphere of life from ours."

"I should imagine so, mamma; but I have given little heed to that. I have so much to tell you. My life is going to be like a fairy-tale; I am so happy—I love him so. When I am with him everything is quite different, so bright, so beautiful. I think no one else has ever loved anyone so much. He is coming next week, he says. I am almost afraid to tell you that he wants me to marry him very soon."

"My dear Audrey, is it possible that you are to be Lady Villiers of Rowan? I cannot believe it. I must tell your father at once."

Nor was Doctor Brooke one whit less surprised.

"Sir Roche Villiers?" he said. "The name is familiar to me—I cannot tell why. But, my dear Audrey, this is a far more serious business than you seem to think it. The Villiers of Rowan are one of the wealthiest and most ancient families in England."

"Are they, papa?" she asked, in a voice of complete unconcern. "He is very good; every wish, every desire of my heart, every dream of my life will come true. I am to do as I like; I may build and teach and plan. I hardly dare think of it all."

"And you love him?" asked Doctor Brooke.

"Love him, papa?"—and the pure, fair face brightened with a wondering smile. "Why, my love is my life!"

Long after their daughter had retired to rest did the Rector and his wife sit up to discuss the unexpected news. The doctor looked anxiously at his wife's face.

"What do you think about it, Isabel?" he asked. "A man like Sir Roche Villiers could marry the daughter of a peer; there need be no limit to his ambition. Audrey has no fortune worth speaking of, no influential connections; why should he choose her?"

"Perhaps he loves her," said the mother, gently. "She is very fair and winsome; she has the great charm of purity and simplicity. Do not think I am foolish about my child, but I often fancy she is more like an angel than a mere mortal. Perhaps her sweet character has attracted him."

But Doctor Brooke was more worldly-wise than the gentle lady whom he called wife.

"I cannot help thinking," he said, "that there must be something we do not understand."

"Why should you say so? After all, there can never be any great difference between gentlemen; and there is no truer gentleman in England than you, Fabian. Sir Roche is marrying a clergyman's daughter; you cannot call it a *mesalliance*."

"Perhaps not; but there is a wide difference between my position and his. We shall see when he comes. My impression is that we shall find something in the background, some reason why Sir Roche has not sought a wife in his own sphere, but in ours."

On the next day, however, when Audrey talked of the Baronet, it was almost impossible to imagine anything wrong. Nothing could be clearer, more straightforward or to the purpose.

Sir Roche loved her, and wanted to make her his wife; he was coming to ask their consent.

He came, and at first sight both parents liked him; the proud, handsome face, with its lingering look of sadness—a face all noble and good—pleased them, though there was a trace of haughtiness about the firm lips and in the dark eyes.

They had no doubt, when they had seen him once with Audrey, that he loved her truly. Nothing could have been more manly, loyal, or straightforward than his offer of marriage to their daughter.

When Doctor Brooke said that she had no fortune the Baronet smiled, and would not take the matter into consideration.

The settlements he made upon her were magnificently liberal; nor would he make them less even when the doctor objected.

Such a prospect was surely never presented before to any simple country rector's daughter.

Sir Roche spoke of the Villiers diamonds, supposed to be some of the finest in England; he referred in the simplest way to his various estates, adding that Audrey could please herself in the choice of one for a residence; he talked of the cottages and schools that they were to build. He seemed to have but one purpose in life, and that was to make Audrey happy.

Later on Doctor Brooke said to his wife:

"I was mistaken; there was no drawback to the marriage, Isabel. I have made every inquiry; on all sides I hear the best possible account of Sir Roche. The only fault people find in him is his melancholy temperament and want of interest in life; that has disappeared since he knew Audrey."

"Why should there be any hesitation? A king might be proud to marry our daughter," rejoined gentle Mrs. Brooke.

"Still," declared the rector, "I shall not be quite happy until I have spoken to him and told him what is on my mind."

"Do not offend him, Fabian. Remember, he is a proud man. What suspicion can you have? You do not believe that he has another wife living, do you?"

"No, that I do not; if he had, he would not dare to make his projected marriage with Audrey public. Certainly I do not think anything half so foolish."

"Do you suspect that there is insanity in the family?" asked Mrs. Brooke; and the doctor laughed.

"Such news would be public property, Isabel, for the Villierses are as well known as the Howards or the Percies. I cannot tell what I fear; I only know that deep down in my heart there is a dread of something—I know not what."

Doctor Brooke did unburden his mind; he always remembered the day and the hour. The two lovers were together in the bay-window.

There was a look of perfect happiness on Audrey's beautiful face—a look which made her so bewitching that the

Rector did not wonder that any man should lose his heart and his head because of her.

He stood for a short time talking to them, listening to the sweet sunny laughter, the bright words, the innocent happy prattle, until his heart grew warm and his eyes moist.

Then he sent Audrey upon some trifling errand, and seated himself beside Sir Roche. Outside the blue sky had no cloud; the golden sunlight lay over flower and leaf; the white Ascension lilies gleamed in the golden haze.

Doctor Brooke turned suddenly to the handsome baronet. "Sir Roche," he said, "tell me why, when you could have chosen a wife from amongst the aristocracy of England, you have preferred to marry my daughter?"

Sir Roche raised his head proudly.

"You are right," he said; "I might have chosen from amongst the aristocracy of England, but amongst them I have seen none equal to your beautiful daughter Audrey."

"It is not an equal marriage in the eyes of the world," remarked the Rector. "Sometimes—pray pardon me for this thought—I have wondered whether you had any reason for choosing a wife quite unknown to the world."

For a moment the dark face flushed and an angry light came into the proud eyes.

"I lay all I have in the world at your daughter's feet," answered Sir Roche—"my wealth, my rank, my love, my heart, my life. I pray her in the face of the whole world to be my wife. What can I do more?"

"Nothing," said Doctor Brooke. "I am ashamed of my question."

Thereupon the two gentleman shook hands; and that same evening the day for the wedding was fixed.

CHAPTER VI.

EVERYONE agreed that it was one of the prettiest weddings that had ever been seen—the wedding of Sir Roche Villiers and Miss Brooke. It took place in the early autumn.

The Rector and his wife had both remonstrated about the shortness of the engagement, but Sir Roche had pleaded so hard that they let him have his way.

"I love Audrey," he said, "and she loves me. I have been lonely and miserable for years—why not let me be happy now that I have the chance? Suppose we do wait as you wish, one, two, or three years; of what use will it be?"

So they consented to the marriage taking place very shortly, and Mrs. Calverne was invited.

The wedding was talked about for years in the countryside. The bridegroom was most munificent. He had ordered such festivities as people had not even dreamed of—a dinner for the poor, both old and young; he gave with a royal hand—clothes, money, all that was needed.

He made every heart light on his wedding-day. It was no wonder that the children cheered as they had never cheered before, and that the poor rose *en masse* to bless and to thank him.

Audrey's friends and relatives were all present, Mrs. Calverne looking perhaps a little paler and more anxious than the others; but—and they thought more of it afterwards—it was a strange thing that no relative of Sir Roche's was there. He said to them half laughingly:

"I shall not shine in the way of aunts, uncles, and cousins on my wedding-day; I have so few relatives living—and even those few I do not know very well. I must make your relatives mine, Audrey."

His groomsman was Lord Aldborough, a man whom neither Doctor Brooke nor his wife liked, because there seemed to be an utter want of heart about him. He treated everything as a jest; and it seemed to them that Sir Roche watched him continually lest he should say something indiscreet.

Lady Armond was the only other friend of his present, and she was serious, not to say dull, and talked a great deal

about woman's duty and woman's rights. She tried to impress the beautiful young bride with a great idea of her own importance. Just as Audrey was about leaving, she went up to her.

"I have something to say to you, my dear," she whispered very solemnly; "let me beg of you always to uphold your rights. A husband should not always have his own way."

Before leaving the bridegroom won golden opinions from all. He made Doctor and Mrs. Brooke promise to spend Christmas at Rowan Abbey; he invited Mrs. Calverne to meet them; he promised the good Rector introductions that delighted him. It was altogether a wedding without a drawback; there was not one thing to mar the gladness of the day.

When Audrey bade her parents farewell, she laid her beautiful head on her mother's breast.

"Mamma," she said, "I have been a happy girl—now I am going to be a happy woman. How good Heaven has been to me!"

"I hope you will always be happy, my darling," returned the gentle mother.

"I have but one fear," said the girl, "and it is that I shall be too happy."

So the newly-made husband and wife drove away amidst the tears and smiles, prayers, good wishes, and cheers of all around them. Dr. Brooke watched the traveling-carriage until it was out of sight, and then he turned to his wife and Mrs. Calverne, who stood near.

"Still," he said, "I cannot realize it. Why should a wealthy and distinguished man have sought a bride from my humble roof?"

"Look at Audrey, and the question is answered," replied Mrs. Brooke.

He did not seem to have heard her, but continued:

"Even now I shall not feel quite satisfied until I have been to Rowan Abbey. I have a feeling that I cannot explain—a dread that something now in the background will start up, and then I shall understand this marriage. Yet common sense asks, What could it be?"

Mrs. Calverne was looking anxiously at him; her comely face had grown pale, and her lips trembled slightly.

"I have known Sir Roche for many years," she said—"my husband knew him when he was a boy—and I have never heard one word against his truth, his loyalty, his honor, or his good name—not one word. All that I can say about him is that he is proud and very high-spirited, with what the world would call severe notions of propriety. If I had known anything against him, he would not have been a visitor at my house, neither should I have introduced him to your daughter."

The words were so calm and reasonable that the Rector could not help being impressed by them.

"After all it is but a nervous fear," he said. "I have made inquiries myself, and have heard nothing but the highest praise of him. Perhaps he is a little stern and unbending; but that is not a fault in an age when most men are disposed to be weak. I have watched him, but I have seen nothing in him but what was most admirable."

Mrs. Brooke noticed then for the first time that Mrs. Calverne's hands were trembling, and that her face was pale.

"You have frightened Mrs. Calverne, Fabian," she said, half reproachfully; but the fair widow looked up suddenly.

"No, he has not. I am not responsible for the marriage even should it not turn out well. And yet I see nothing but happiness before Sir Roche and Audrey."

"There is nothing but happiness before them," said Mrs. Brooke. "Happiness is the natural reward of goodness, such as Audrey has ever shown. She has always been sweet, gentle, self-sacrificing, kind and true. Why should she not be happy?"

Of course it was all nonsense, nervous nonsense, which caused the Rector to speak as he did; still the gentle heart of the mother beat somewhat with fear. She looked at the

late white lilies which Audrey had loved so much, and the scene of years before, when Audrey had read the marriage service, came back to her. She smiled as she thought of it. So loving, so gentle, so wise and sweet—how could her child be aught but happy?

So the sun set on Audrey's wedding-day. The guests went home, the festivities ended, the children ceased their playing. Father and mother, kneeling together, prayed the Almighty to bless their beloved child.

It was sunset when Lady Villiers reached her new home. She was hardly prepared to find such a magnificent and picturesque pile of buildings.

"This is our home, Audrey," said Sir Roche. He clasped his arms round his young wife, and drew her to his heart.

She wondered to find his lips trembling with emotion, his eyes full of tears.

"Lay your hands in mine, sweet love," he said, "and let us pray Heaven together to bless our home."

It did not occur to Audrey, either then or afterwards, that it was strange that there was no public welcome for her, that no cheering crowds of tenants and dependents awaited her, that no joy-bells sounded from the old gray towers of King's Wynne, that no servants were grouped in the hall to receive their new mistress when she stood in the magnificent entrance.

Her husband turned to her, and said, "Welcome home!" A gray-haired old butler then came forward and bowed to her. Sir Roche looked round hastily.

"Send Mrs. Grey here," he said to a footman at a little distance; and in a few minutes a comely woman wearing a black-silk dress and a white low cap was bowing before the beautiful young bride.

"I wish you long life, health, and happiness, my lady," said Mrs. Grey; but Audrey thought it strange that she should speak to her without looking at her.

"Mrs. Grey," requested Sir Roche, "will you show Lady Villiers to her apartments?" And Audrey followed with her maid.

"Your rooms, my lady, are in the eastern wing," said Mrs. Grey. "Sir Roche thought you would find them pleasant and warm."

Audrey looked with a smile into the comely face.

"The Abbey must be very old," she said. "Many a young wife has been brought here, I should suppose."

"Yes," returned the housekeeper, slowly. "You will see the picture-gallery to-morrow, my lady. Some fair faces hang on the walls."

"And they have all had these rooms?" said Audrey.

There was a moment's silence, and then Mrs. Grey answered:

"No, I think not. But Sir Roche says they are the prettiest rooms, my lady. That is why he wished you to have them."

"Have you been here long, Mrs. Grey?" asked Audrey.

"Over forty years, my lady. I was still-room maid when Sir Roche's mother, the late Lady Villiers, was brought home here a bride, and I have been here ever since."

"And now you see another Lady Villiers. I hope I shall be as good and as much loved as the last one!"

She wondered why the comely face grew pale.

"There are burdens in every life, my lady," said Mrs. Grey.

After this Lady Villiers asked some questions about the servants, and heard, to her surprise, that they were all new ones, excepting the housekeeper and the butler. It struck her as being strange.

Then her attention was drawn to the magnificence through which they were passing—to the grand corridors, the handsome pictures and white marble statues, the carpets of velvet pile, so soft that no step could be heard upon them.

The wealth, the grandeur, the beauty of everything around her, took her by surprise. Sir Roche had never spoken to her of the beauty of the Abbey, and when at length she stood in the superb suite of rooms that had been

prepared for her, she grew grave and silent; she had not thought of being mistress of all this magnificence. She wondered why she had not been placed in the rooms that the other ladies of the house had used, and why every servant in the house, except two, were quite new. It seemed very strange.

CHAPTER VII.

HER exalted position did not affect the character of Lady Villiers. She was as simple, kind, sweet, and wise as she had been in the Rectory. Before long the servants almost worshiped her; all the friends and neighbors to whom Sir Roche introduced her were charmed and delighted with her; in a short space of time she became the queen of the county.

Sir Roche was delighted; she was so wise, yet so simple, so unconscious of her wonderful beauty, so humble and unassuming in the midst of her splendid surroundings, that he felt he had won a treasure of priceless worth. Yet even during the first few months of her married life many strange things struck Lady Villiers in her new home. The first was that one day, when Roche was speaking of the house, and she expressed a desire to go over it, she fancied he seemed unwilling. Suddenly however he added:

"If you would like it, Audrey, I will take you myself. It is a very large house, and you will be very tired, I am afraid."

"I am never tired when I am with you," she said, laughingly; and they went together.

First he took her to the ruined keep whence the Abbey derived its name; he showed the ivy-grown arch of what had once been one of the finest windows in England. Then they went over the modern portion of the Abbey; he showed her the state-rooms, the grand banqueting hall, used when kings and queens came that way, the ball-room, the state drawing-room, the old library, the bedroom where kings and queens had slept, the picture-gallery where the beautiful Ladies Villiers hung upon the walls.

They lingered long there; Audrey was charmed with the delicate patrician faces, and Sir Roche had a history for every portrait.

"This is my mother," he said, standing before the picture of a fair-faced lady whose blue eyes were filled with light and love.

Audrey looked up with a smile.

"And my place will be next to hers," she said. Suddenly she cried, "Why, Roche, there has been a picture here!"

His face grew white as death, and then flushed hotly.

"No picture will ever hang there but yours," he said evasively, as he hurriedly turned away.

She looked again at the wall. Assuredly there had been a picture there; but her womanly tact told her not to speak to Sir Roche about it.

They went to the southern part of the Abbey, and there again Sir Roche hesitated. Audrey suddenly remembered what the housekeeper had said.

"Where are the rooms that were used until lately?" she asked. "I should like to see them."

They were large, lofty, bright rooms. She preferred them to her own.

"I should like these rooms," she said, "much better than my own."

But Sir Roche, generally so keenly alive to her least wish, now said nothing.

Several of the rooms were locked—the best of them, it seemed to her; and as she turned the handle of each Sir Roche's face grew paler.

Lady Villiers returned from her long inspection with a sense of mystery hanging over her which puzzled her. She was so obedient to her husband from principle as well as from affection that, if he had expressed a wish that she should not enter the closed rooms in the south wing, she would never have entered them; but he had never expressed that wish.

One day when he was absent, the idea suddenly occurred

to her that she would go over the south wing. She rang for Mrs. Grey, the expression of whose kindly, comely face changed when she heard her ladyship's request.

"Fetch the keys, Mrs. Grey," she said; "I want to go through the rooms in the southern wing."

In vain Mrs. Grey made one excuse after another. Audrey smiled; she intended to be obeyed.

"Sir Roche did say, my lady, that he hoped those rooms would never be unlocked," she said at last.

"Sir Roche never expressed such a wish to me," Lady Villiers replied, laughingly. "You will make me think that the rooms are like Bluebeard's closet;" and she wondered again why the housekeeper looked as though someone had struck her a sudden blow.

In a few minutes more they were standing before the doors of the closed rooms. Mrs. Grey unlocked them unwillingly.

"They are very dusty and dirty, my lady," she said; "for, as you see, Sir Roche will not have them touched."

The dust of years, it seemed to Audrey, lay upon them; yet they were beautiful rooms—large, lofty, light, and magnificently furnished. She saw no signs of preservation; the bookcases, wardrobes, and drawers had evidently been quickly emptied, some pictures also had been hurriedly taken from the walls, the vases and *jardinieres* still held the withered, dead leaves of what had been blooming flowers.

There was something most sad and pathetic about the rooms; on the mantelpiece of one lay a little gold watch that had long ceased ticking.

"This was Lady Villiers' watch without doubt," said Audrey. And she touched it with reverent hands.

"I would not touch anything, my lady," cried Mrs. Grey. She saw a book—almost the only one there—thickly covered with dust. It was turned over at Adelaide Procter's beautiful "Legend of Provence."

"Lady Villiers admired good poetry," she said musingly.

She saw a pretty little satin slipper and a white lace shawl. She could not tell why, but she did not like to touch them. As she stood there she shuddered.

"I cannot tell what it is," she said slowly to Mrs. Grey, "but there is something in the very atmosphere of these rooms that saddens me. I wish I had not seen them—it is as though someone lay dead here."

"They will be all the brighter and more wholesome, my lady, for your having been in them," returned Mrs. Grey.

"They seem to me to have been wrecked rather than emptied," remarked the young wife, looking around. "I could imagine that someone had been here in a violent passion and had half emptied all the rooms without order or method. Why are you staring at me, Mrs. Grey?"

"I beg your pardon, my lady—I was not aware of it. I was listening to you."

"Close the rooms," said Audrey. "I shall never want to see them again. I have often read that apartments have this strange appearance after the people who have used them have died in them. Did Lady Villiers die here? Why do you look so frightened? Did my husband's mother die here?"

"Yes, my lady," was the subdued reply. And then they left the south wing together.

"I have been through the closed rooms to-day, Roche," she said to her husband when he returned home.

He looked at her with a startled glance.

"Have you? Who was with you?" he asked; and she answered, "Mrs. Grey."

Was it fancy, or did she that same evening really overhear her husband speaking in an angry voice to the housekeeper? Did she fancy it, or did she really hear Mrs. Grey answer, "I could not help it, Sir Roche—indeed I could not. I did my best to avoid arousing suspicion"?

She must have imagined the words; she would not believe that she had overheard them.

Some weeks after this she was in the library with Sir

Roche, looking over some music when she came upon a song that she knew well—Blumenthal's "Message."

"I know that," she said, taking it up. She saw written on it, in a flowing Italian hand, the name "Elodie." She repeated it aloud. "What a beautiful name! Have you had a sister or cousin called Elodie?"

She wondered why he should take the music so abruptly from her hand.

"I did not know there was anything in this house with that name on it," he cried.

"Elodie!" she said again. "It is a beautiful name; it reminds me of the flow of a river. Why, you have destroyed the song!"

He had torn it into pieces and trampled them under his feet.

"I hate the song, the name!" he cried. "Do not speak of them again."

She was very quiet and subdued for some time; the scene had puzzled and troubled her.

Several other things began to puzzle her. She was the idol of half the county, but there was one family that had never called upon her, the Letsoms of Burrowdale.

She noticed also that they were never invited to meet them, and she wondered why. She asked Sir Roche about it more than once, but he always returned an evasive answer. One morning she spoke of it to Lady Moreton, who was a great friend of hers.

"Why have the Letsoms never called on me?" she asked.

"Have they not done so?" returned Lady Moreton.

"No," replied Audrey. "They avoid me—they never go where I go. It seems so strange."

Her quick instinct told her that Lady Moreton evaded the question and would not answer it.

"Do tell me," she said; "if there is really any reason, I should like to know it."

"I can imagine no reason," was the reply, "unless it be that they are very religious and look at life in a very serious light."

Lady Villiers opened her beautiful eyes very wide.

"That is what I like," she cried. "But I cannot understand why the fact of their being very religious should prevent them from calling upon me."

Lady Moreton looked uncomfortable.

"Some persons are so strange," she said in a half-apologetic tone, "and have such old-fashioned ideas."

"I cannot imagine any ideas; be they as old-fashioned as they may, which could prevent anyone from calling upon me," remarked Audrey proudly.

That same evening Lady Villiers, putting her arms caressingly around her husband's neck, said:

"Roche, could you give a reason why so-called religious people should not visit me?"

She never forgot the flame of anger in his face.

"I cannot. Tell me what you mean, Audrey?" he said.

She repeated her conversation with Lady Moreton. He cried out angrily that he would not allow the Letsoms to come near them, and that lady Moreton was a woman without common-sense. He did not grow calm again until, looking into the eyes of his wife, he saw no suspicion there.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS came; and in accordance with their promise Doctor Brooke and his wife spent it at Rowan Abbey. If any doubt had lingered in the Rector's mind, it was now dispelled; if any lingering fear, suspicion, or dread had shadowed his thoughts about his beautiful daughter, it now ceased to exist.

It was plain that nothing could be more prosperous or bright than her lot. There was no skeleton in the Villiers cupboard.

Audrey told her parents of the closed rooms—the rooms into which Sir Roche would allow no one to enter—and they agreed that it was perfectly natural, as his mother had died there, that he should wish to keep them as they were,

They thought that so good a son must make a good husband; they liked him all the better for this trait in his character.

The Rector laughed away the last remnant of his fear. He was so sorry for having entertained it, that he was less observant than he might have been. Had he been more attentive, he might at times have seen a smile almost of contempt on the faces of some with whom he came in contact. He might have understood the covert sneer when Lord Colvil, one of the guests, complimented him upon having "advanced views."

"I am not aware of it, my lord," he answered, with a smile of wonder.

"You have given ample proof of it," said his lordship; and the Rector did not ask why.

He might have been struck too by the fact that, while half the county worshipped his beautiful daughter, some few held aloof as though there were contamination at Rowan. He might have noticed also how his son-in-law kept near him when he was talking to strangers, and seldom left him. But none of these things struck the Rector.

One day he was puzzled. A number of guests were speaking of their plans for the ensuing year, and Lady Moreton said to Sir Roche:

"You will go to London, of course, for the season? Lady Villiers will be presented at the first Drawing-room?"

Doctor Brooke was surprised when Sir Roche, growing white even to his lips, said he was not quite sure—he should consider about it. The Rector saw a sudden gleam of intelligence come over Lady Moreton's face, and—how it was he could never tell—the conversation turned upon the Court of St. James, and how particular the Queen was, and how impossible it was for one to obtain an *entree* within the highest circle if not blameless and without reproach.

The Rector looked in dismay at those around him. Why were they talking in this strain? Then he smiled at his fears; it had nothing to do with his child. Audrey was listening with a bright laughing face; it was by mere accident that such a subject had come to be discussed. He put it aside; it did not concern his daughter.

"Hers was a marriage made in heaven," said the Rector to his wife. "It is wonderful what an amount of good Sir Roche and Audrey are doing."

He would have enlarged upon it had he known the full extent of their benevolence. A church was being built, also schools with spacious playgrounds; almshouses too, which overlooked the fields and woods; the small ill-drained cottages were giving way to clean, healthy dwelling-houses. Rowan promised to be a model estate.

The Rector went away quite satisfied as to his daughter's happiness, and ashamed of the fears he had felt.

Spring came, with its fair delicate loveliness, and Sir Roche found that he would have to spend some time in town.

"I shall be sorry," he said, "to leave Rowan, Audrey. You have taught me to love the place. I feel now that it is my home; my sweet wife has brightened it until it seems to me like an earthly paradise. I wonder if you will like London, Audrey?"

"I shall like any place where you are," she answered. "It is not the place—it is you that make home."

"You have learnt to love me well, Audrey," he said, drawing her gently to him, and kissing the sweet face.

She looked at him with thoughtful eyes.

"My love has made my life complete," she responded.

So they talked while the tender radiance of the spring brightened all the land. No one on seeing Sir Roche would have recognized in him the miserable man whose lips had trembled with a curse he dared not utter. His very face had changed; it had grown hopeful, bright, and animated. The winter of sorrow had passed over him, and the summer sun of happiness shone upon him.

It was a sight never to be forgotten when her ladyship, the beautiful young mistress of Rowan, left the Abbey for London. Sir Roche was touched more than he liked to

own. The poor and the children thronged round her ladyship to say good-bye to her. They wanted nothing from her—only to look once more on the beautiful face of her who was always so kind and gentle to them.

"How they love you, Audrey!" said her husband as the train steamed out of the station. "I am almost jealous of them."

"You might be jealous of one," she replied, "but not of a crowd."

He raised her hands to his lips.

"My darling," he said, "I love you with such a pure and perfect love that jealousy is not possible to me."

They talked so happily and lovingly, little dreaming of the tragedy that would be played before they saw Rowan Abbey again.

CHAPTER IX.

FASHIONABLE London opened its arms to receive Lady Villiers. She was not presented at Court, but she never asked the reason. It was sufficient for her that Sir Roche had not mentioned the matter.

The fact did not seem to affect her popularity. She was overwhelmed with invitations. The beautiful Lady Villiers very soon became a celebrity. In the midst of the gay world, with every temptation around her, she preserved the same sweet wisdom, purity, truth and loyalty that had always distinguished her. She made her influence felt.

Above all things she disliked cant. She never touched upon religious subjects unless the circumstances suited. None the less her influence as a good woman was felt. No one liked to speak lightly of sacred things before her. People in her presence did not jest about a man's truth or a woman's honor.

There was something in the pure face and clear steadfast eyes which elevated men's thoughts as they looked at her—something which forbade evil speech, which stopped light, false words on the speaker's lips.

"Do you like this life, Audrey?" asked her husband one day.

She looked at him with a charming smile.

"It is very pleasant," she said, "but I should not like it always. You are its chief charm."

Day by day she grew to love him more deeply, more dearly, more tenderly; so the coming blow, when it fell, fell more heavily.

One lovely morning in May Lady Villiers sat alone in the drawing-room of her London house. Sir Roche came in with a pleased smile.

"Audrey," he said, "I have good news. I have met an old friend of yours who is anxious to renew her acquaintance with you."

She looked up at him.

"I did not know that I had any old friends in London," she said; "they are all new ones."

"Lady Rockhaven claims to be an old one."

"Lady Rockhaven?" she repeated. "Why, that is Bertha Hamlyn's name! Is she in town?"

"Yes, and very desirous of seeing you. I like Lady Rockhaven herself very well; but she has a clique of friends for whom I do not care. I would not allow her to introduce any of them here, if I were you, Audrey. They are most of them very fast, and talk loudly about horses and so forth, if they do no worse."

And Sir Roche described to his simple, innocent wife the different varieties of ladies who composed what is called "society."

On that same day Lady Rockhaven called, and professed great delight at seeing Audrey again. Lady Rockhaven had made a position for herself, but it did not quite satisfy her. She wanted to climb higher, and it struck her that in beautiful, wealthy Lady Villiers she had found a medium.

"Marriage has not altered you in the least, Lady Villiers," she said. "You are just the same."

"Has it altered you?" asked Audrey, with a smile.

"Yes, it has. I love the world and life ten times better than I ever did before," said Lady Rockhaven. "I have more to live for."

But in some vague way Lady Audrey was not quite satisfied with her newly-found friend.

Shortly afterwards a ball was given at Rock House by Lady Rockhaven, and Sir Roche and Audrey attended it. Audrey was the loveliest woman present. She wore a beautiful costume of white and gold; and her wonderful loveliness was the theme of all present. Lady Rockhaven was jealous of her. She wished her to grace her ball; but she did not intend to be so utterly extinguished by her superior grace and beauty. It was jealousy perhaps that caused her to be somewhat brusque with her lovely young rival.

Lady Villiers was talking to the Countess of Northendon when a lovely golden-haired woman, most exquisitely dressed, crossed the ball-room on Lord Rockhaven's arm.

"Who is that?" said Lady Villiers. "What a beautiful face! What a lovely woman! Who is she?"

The Countess of Northendon shrugged her white shoulders.

"That is the fault I find with Lady Rockhaven. She will not keep her balls select. That woman has no business here. I am not a prude, but I do not care to meet such people."

"Who is she?" persisted Audrey.

"She is Lady Glenarvon now, I suppose. She was Lady Tirwell some time since."

"Why has she changed her name?" asked innocent Audrey.

Again the countess shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Lady Villiers," she said, "do you never read the divorce cases?"

"Never," answered Audrey emphatically.

"Surely you must have heard of that one—'Tirwell *versus* Glenarvon?' It has been discussed at every breakfast-table and in every club in London. I never did or could understand the right or the wrong of the matter; all that I know is that Lady Tirwell disappeared under a cloud. Now Lady Glenarvon has suddenly appeared, and she is received everywhere. She has never been to court. The line must be drawn somewhere; and I do not think any *divorcee* would be welcome there."

Lady Villiers was listening with great attention.

"*Divorcee!*" she repeated. "You do not mean to say that that beautiful lady has been divorced?"

"What else can I mean? Lord Tirwell is abroad somewhere, and she has married Lord Glenarvon."

Audrey looked up in such wonder that her companion was struck.

"Do you really mean," she said, "that that lady has two husbands living?"

The countess laughed.

"You are so delightfully simple, my dear Lady Villiers. Of course she hasn't two husbands; the law relieved her of one, and she took another."

"The law could not; no law could—divine law forbids it!" cried Audrey. And the countess laughed again.

"It is the question of the day," she said; "I leave it to wiser heads than mine to settle."

"But it is monstrous!" cried Audrey, her fair face flushing. "I did not think such things were permitted in a christian land."

"You are new to the outer world," said the countess half sadly. "I read and hear of divorce cases continually. I could tell you stories of divorce that would frighten you—of false swearing, of conspiracies, of persecution—of women with broken hearts, of men with ruined homes. Not till the end of the world will the true records of the divorce court be known. I—but it is useless talking."

"Why do people receive such women?" asked Audrey. "I would not. There are no words stronger or more sacred than these—'Those whom God hath joined together let no

man put asunder; ' there can be no doubt as to what is the right course."

" We cannot discuss the question in a ball-room," said the countess.

As she spoke Lady Rockhaven came up to them, and the countess went away.

" Audrey," said her friend, " I want to introduce you to Lady Glenarvon; she has been inquiring about you, and is very anxious to know you."

Never in her life had Lady Villiers looked so proud as when she raised her head and gazed with calm eyes into the handsome face of the hostess.

" I must decline, Bertha; I do not wish to make Lady Glenarvon's acquaintance. I beg you will not mention her to me; I decline decidedly to know her."

Perhaps Lady Rockhaven's temper had been a little ruffled; she looked very impatient.

" May I ask why?" she said.

" You know why, Bertha; and allow me to add that I wonder you should make such a woman your friend or invite her to your house."

" Will you tell me why, Lady Villiers?" she said. " I have a great desire to hear the reason."

" You know the reason; I have just heard it. That person whom you call Lady Glenarvon has—oh, shame, Bertha, that you should make me say it!—her rightful husband living abroad; she is a *divorcee*!"

" This is amusing," laughed Lady Rockhaven—but for the moment she hated the woman whom she felt was right. " You, my dear Lady Villiers, decline to know Lady Glenarvon because she is a *divorcee*! This is one of the jests of the season."

" I do not see that it is a jest," said Audrey.

" But I do. What a capital story to tell everywhere! People who live in glass houses should not throw stones."

" I do not live in a glass house," said Lady Villiers proudly. " I would rather have died a thousand times than have gone into a *divorce-court*."

Lady Rockhaven seemed suddenly to recollect herself.

" Of course I know, Audrey, that *divorce-courts* were not made for such as you; but, all the same, I would not, were I in your place, say too much against divorce."

" I shall never speak of it without reason; and I shall tell the truth," she said.

" What excuse am I to make to Lady Glenarvon?" asked Bertha.

" Make no excuse; I am quite willing to abide by what I have said. Why should you or I seek for false excuses? Why frame a pretence that she must see through? I think she has acted wrongly, and I decline to know her."

A strange smile curled Lady Rockhaven's lips.

" You will not get on in society, Audrey, if you hold by-gone opinions," she said.

" Society is quite a secondary consideration with me," returned Lady Villiers. " If the leaders of society refused to tolerate wrong-doing, this would be a very much better world."

" I have neither time nor inclination to reform it," laughed Lady Rockhaven. " Now remember, I warn you not to send that message to Lady Glenarvon. You will not like the consequences, I am sure."

" They cannot affect me; and, even if they did, I would never pretend to countenance that which I believe to be wrong."

" Well, you will remember that I warned you; whatever happens, do not blame me, Audrey."

" Nothing will happen," said Lady Villiers; " but when I have more time to talk to you, I shall try to persuade you to give up such friends."

Lady Rockhaven laughed.

" You may try, my dear, but you will not succeed," she returned. And then the conversation ended.

Royal Italian Opera. She had been the observed of all observers during the night. She had worn the famous Villiers diamonds, with a superb dress of pale blue; her brown hair, her dark eyes, her pure, beautiful face with its sweet expression, had attracted more observation than anything on the stage.

Once, on looking round the house, she saw Lady Glenarvon watching her intently; she was on the opposite side, looking very lovely in a marvelous costume of black and silver. Several gentlemen were in the box with her, and it was evident that Lady Glenarvon was amusing them greatly by some anecdote she was telling.

More than once their eyes met, and Lady Villiers flushed with annoyance; she was merciful always in her judgments, but to her pure and innocent mind there was something revolting in the idea that a woman over whom such a shadow hung should set herself up in high places to receive the homage and admiration of men.

As she stood in the crush-room Sir Roche looked at the fair face of his young wife. He mistook the sadness for fatigue.

" You are tired, my darling," he said. " If you do not mind my leaving you for a few moments, I will try to get the carriage at once."

She liked afterwards to remember that she had looked with a loving smile into his kindly eyes—that as he released her hand he had held it lovingly in his grasp—for after that hour the world was never the same to her again.

As she stood there a group of people passed her.

She had a confused notion of white silk, of black and silver, of pearl-gray brocade brushing past her as a slip of folded paper was thrust into her hand, she could not tell by whom.

" You threw down the gauntlet!" a silvery voice hissed in her ear; but when she turned round no one was near her—the group of ladies had passed.

She looked at the paper.

" Read this when you are quite alone," was written in large letters across it.

In a moment it occurred to her that it was some begging-letter from one who wanted help—she had many such; she placed it in the pocket of her dress, and resolved to read it when she reached home.

Sir Roche had promised to spend an hour at his club with a famous traveler who had just returned from a long exploring tour in Africa. When he saw the pale, tired look on his wife's face, he said:

" Audrey, I shall not go to the club; I will go home with you."

But she would not hear of it.

" I heard you promise Mr. Miles," she said, " and you must go."

He drove with her as far as the club, and sat with her hand in his. He kissed her face, and said that he must take more care of her, that she must not go out so much. And, when the carriage stopped at the club, he kissed her lips and said laughingly that he would a thousand times rather go home with her than hear of Miles' exploits.

Some instinct made her bend forward and say:

" Kiss me again, Roche."

He kissed her again, little dreaming that it was for the last time.

He ascended the broad flight of steps, thinking of the sweet face, the tender lips, the dear voice, and almost wishing Miles still in Africa, while Lady Villiers drove home. She did not open the note until her maid had left her and she was quite alone. Then she unfolded the paper and read the cruel words that stabbed her gentle heart.

" The writer of this advises Lady Villiers not to say anything more on the subject of divorces, as she is making herself and her husband a jest at which all London laughs. The writer can hardly imagine Lady Villiers to be quite in ignorance of the circumstances under which she was married; but, if it should be so, Lady Villiers had better get a copy of the *Times* for Thursday, the 17th of April, 18—, and

CHAPTER X.

LADY VILLIERS was standing in the crush-room of the

amongst the reports of the divorce cases she will find one that will not only surprise her, but will close her lips for the future on all such subjects."

Audrey read the note with a contemptuous smile; no faint glimmering of the truth came to her—no suspicion.

"How could a divorce case affect me?" she asked herself. "I do not know anyone who has been through the Divorce Court. The lines are written only to frighten me."

Still the words touched her. She could not sleep for thinking of them. She repeated them over and over again to herself. Her husband and herself a jest at which all London laughed—what could it mean? Surely it had no reference to Roche. She sprang up with a cry of horror on her lips. Her husband! Dear Heaven, it surely could have nothing to do with him!

Her heart beat wildly, her brain burned, her blood ran like fire through her veins, and then froze like ice. Her husband—the one man she had loved with the love of her life—could the reference affect him? They had never spoken on such a subject as divorce, but she felt quite sure that he would share her opinions.

Still a horrible fear seized her which made her heart stand still; her lips grew cold and trembled; there was something wrong, or how would a stranger dare to write such words to her?

It seemed long before the sun shone through the windows—she rose at once when she saw the first beams. She had but one thought in her mind, and that was to get a copy of the *Times* of April 17, 18—, as soon as possible.

Hope came back with the daylight. Why need she have suffered such pain and fright? All would be well; her husband stood apart from other men. She knew by the purity and stainless honor of his life that there was no need to fear for him.

Yet why did her heart beat fast, why did every nerve thrill, why was her face so white, why did the breath come in thick hot gasps from her lips, what was this awful sense of foreboding? She opened her window, and the sweet western wind blew in; the sky was beautiful in its first rosy flush of dawn.

It was too early yet to carry out her purpose. She sat by the window waiting and praying. Though she had the simplicity and innocence of a child, she was not without the quick common sense which always points out the readiest way to accomplish much. She had wondered what she was to do in order to get the *Times* of the desired date, and reason told her that the quickest plan would be to go to the *Times* office and see if they could let her have what she wanted; it was only five years back—surely there would be no difficulty.

Her maid looked surprised on finding her beautiful young mistress up and dressed.

"Rose," said Lady Villiers, "I am going out. I want a cab—I will not take the carriage—order a cab, and dress yourself to go with me."

It was unusual; but Audrey's servants loved her and willingly obeyed her. In a few minutes' time Lady Villiers and her maid were on their way to the city.

Her purpose was not so easily accomplished as she had imagined—there were many delays—she had to drive from one place to another; but at last she succeeded, and held in her hands a copy of the *Times* for Thursday, the 17th of April, five years before. She looked at the paper as she held it folded in her hands—what did it contain?

"I have found what I wanted, Rose," she said to her maid; "we will hurry back home." She would not open the folded sheets; whatever they contained, she must be alone when she read them.

In another half hour she and her maid were at home. It was nearly noon then, and Sir Roche, after leaving a little note for his wife, had gone out—he would return to luncheon at two.

Audrey read the note. "How dearly he loves me!" was the thought that passed through her mind as she went once more to the solitude of her own room.

She controlled her impatience while Rose took off the plain walking-dress and brought her her pretty dressing-gown. The maid brushed out the long bright hair, and left it lying like a glittering veil on her mistress' shoulders; then she drew the easy-chair near to the open window, and left Lady Villiers to rest, little dreaming how impatiently she wished her gone.

The door was closed, and she was alone at last, with the newspaper in her hands. She saw the case at once; it was the second on the list.

"VILLIERS v. DIGHTON."

"The last hearing of this celebrated case took place today. Sir Roche Villiers was examined. Witnesses proved that Elodie, Lady Villiers, left London on the evening of February 21st with the co-respondent, Captain Archer Dighton. There was no defence. The divorce was granted. Captain Archer Dighton was condemned to pay five thousand pounds damages and costs."

Lower down in the same column was a paragraph which ran as follows:

"ROMANCE IN HIGH LIFE.—None of our readers will be surprised to hear that Sir Roche Villiers has succeeded in obtaining a divorce from his wife. The unfortunate lady whose name has lately become so notorious was young, beautiful, and had been one of the leaders of fashion. Captain Archer Dighton has been condemned to pay five thousand pounds damage. This unhappy affair has created a great sensation in London. Sir Roche Villiers had not long succeeded to the Barony of King's Wynne and the Rowan estate. When will dawn a brighter day for the manners and morals of Old England?"

As she read the words it seemed to her that all the life was dying slowly from her. She felt the light depart from her eyes, the strength from her limbs; the paper fell from her trembling hands on to the floor; she sank back with a low cry as from the lips of a dying woman.

She lay quite motionless and silent, the sun shining on her face, the wind breathing over it, while she was unconscious of everything.

How long she remained so she never knew. When she recovered consciousness, one by one, like the sharp cuts of a sword, there came to her the trivial events which at the time they had happened had seemed nothing.

Was what she had read the cause of the Letsoms avoiding her, of Lady Moreton's speaking of some of her neighbors as religious people, of her never having been to Court?

A hundred little circumstances, all confirming what she had read, came back to her—the closed rooms at Rowan, the song with the name of Elodie upon it which her husband had destroyed so fiercely, the words he had said to her, when he first wooed her, about the treachery of one whom he had trusted. She fell upon her knees with a bitter cry. The report must be true—everything corroborated it.

Then she heard Sir Roche's step in the hall. He was singing softly to himself the refrain of some love-song. He went into the library, and as he closed the door the sound of his voice ceased.

"I must go to him," she said to herself; "I must ask him about it; I must know the truth."

She took the newspaper in her hands. As she moved across the room she caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror—a white, wild face, out of which wild eyes gleamed with a strange fire. She did not know herself.

"I must go at once," she said, "or I shall go mad."

She went to the library and opened the door. Sir Roche was writing. He looked up with a smile as she entered, but the smile disappeared when he saw the unutterable woe in the dark eyes, the trembling lips on which all sound seemed to die away. He rose and went to her.

"Audrey, my darling," he said, "what is the matter?" She placed the newspaper in his hands.

"Read this," she said, "and tell me if it be true."

Her voice was so changed and hollow that it startled him. He looked at the newspaper. Ah, there was no need to ask

again if it were true or not, no need for words! He read the first few lines, and his face grew as white as her own.

"Is it true?" she asked.

He was silent for a minute, looking with wistful eyes into her own; then he spoke calmly, clearly.

"Yes, it is quite true," he answered; "but why need it trouble you?"

"Is it true that five years ago you had a young wife whom you called Elodie?"

"It is quite true, my darling, but—"

She held up her hand with a gesture for silence—an imperious, graceful gesture which he could not resist. He was silent.

"Did you really marry her as you married me? Was it a lawful, legal, honorable marriage before God and man?"

"It was," he replied.

"She was your wife. She loved you, you loved her. Your marriage was legal, honorable—you admit all this?"

"Yes; but listen, Audrey—"

"Let me speak first. If this be true—oh, Heaven, Roche!—tell me what am I?"

"You are my dear and honored wife," he cried.

"Nay, that is impossible. A man cannot have two wives, and you had a wife living when you married me."

"I deny it. I had no wife. I was as free to marry as you yourself."

"Who then was Elodie?" she asked.

"She was my wife, but the law had freed me from her—the law had freed me, freed her."

"What law?" she asked slowly.

"The law of the land—the law that steps in to save men and women from being driven mad."

"It could not, Roche," she said, with the calmness of despair. "There is no vow so solemn as the marriage vow. It is taken before Heaven, and death can only give relief. No man, no human power can step in and put asunder those whom God hath joined together."

She stopped, for the words died on her lips. He looked at her with infinite pity and kindness.

"You are mistaken, Audrey," he said. "The human law does step in and free those who have been joined by a solemn vow."

"It cannot—at least, that is my belief. The words of the marriage service are 'until death do us part.' Death has not parted you from Elodie, the woman you married." She looked up at him with a strange expression. "Is she still living, Roche?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes, she is still living," he replied slowly.

She uttered a low cry of bitter agony.

"Oh, Heaven, Roche," she said, "if that be true, what am I?"

"Audrey, you must listen to reason. You are in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of all men, my lawful, honored, most beloved wife."

"What am I in the eyes of Heaven?" she asked.

"The same," he replied.

"Nay, that cannot be. It is the same Heaven you called to witness the fact that you took Elodie as your wife until death should part you. Death has not parted you; therefore, before Heaven, you are not free, and she is still your wife."

"My dearest Audrey, you must listen to reason," he began.

"That is reason," she answered, "the highest, wisest, best."

"You have been so quietly and so strictly brought up, Audrey," he said, "you are hardly qualified to judge."

She wrung her hands with a little cry that touched his heart.

"My bringing up makes but little difference; there is but one rule for right or wrong. No false arguments, no sophistries, can alter my opinion; and, fixed and unalterable, it is this—that no man having a wife living can marry another—that no human power can free you from an

oath taken before God—that no law can either supersede or set aside the law of God."

"But, Audrey—nay, you must listen, dear—there are exceptions to all rules. There are cases where the law most wisely and rightly steps in and frees a man from the woman who has dishonored him."

"That may be. The law may in one sense free him—may punish her; but she is still his wife until death parts them. He may send her away, but he cannot marry another—that would make a mockery of the marriage service. An oath is taken to be kept, not broken; only death can part them—and Heaven knows best when to send death."

"Your views are tinged by your education, Audrey," he said, sadly. "I ought to have told you of this before our marriage, but I was a coward, I dared not. Knowing your peculiar training, I was afraid that you would refuse me. I thought that perhaps you would never know—and I loved you madly."

"You should not have married me, Roche. You have not made me your wife; you have simply allowed me to usurp another's place."

"I prayed that you might never know it, Audrey. I sent away every old servant from Rowan except two. I hoped you would never know it."

"You should have told me," she said sadly. "It would have been so much easier to part then than now."

"Part!" he cried. "Oh, surely, my darling, you cannot mean that? We must not part—we cannot part!"

"I am not your wife," she said simply. "I cannot remain here."

He drew nearer to her.

"You will drive me mad!" he cried. "If I lose you, I shall lose my hope of earth and Heaven."

"And if I stay I shall lose every hope of Heaven," she said.

"My darling, you cannot mean it. Why should you be so terribly hard and cruel to me, when I have done nothing but love you?"

"You have made a terrible mistake," she said faintly. "You have placed me in a false position; you have made me seem to do willingly that which I detest and abhor. If it broke my heart to go, I should go. Knowing what I know, I cannot remain another hour under this roof. I am in another woman's place; I bear another woman's name; I hold the heart of another woman's husband. Oh, may Heaven pardon me, I did not know it!"

"Audrey, you must listen," he cried.

She stood before him, pale, erect, with the look that a painter would give to a martyr on her face.

"No," she said, "it is better that I should not listen. I love you very dearly—I might be tempted to believe what you said; and I must not, I will not—my own conscience tells me what is right. I know the sanctity of marriage, I know the solemnity of the marriage vow—I would rather not listen. Words are specious enough, but they can never make wrong right."

"Audrey, listen to the story of my marriage. When you have heard it, I will abide by your judgment; and that will be in my favor, I am sure. Sit down, darling, and listen."

He placed her on the little couch, and knelt before her while he told her his story.

"You will judge me less harshly when you have heard all," he said. "I met Elodie Danefield when I was twenty years old. She was young, very beautiful, gay, animated, and full of wit and talent. She was living with her aunt, Lady Danefield, who was an old friend of my mother's—that was how I came to know her. She had no fortune, and from the first moment that Lady Danefield had seen us together she had settled it in her own mind that we were to marry. Elodie was very beautiful, but nothing about her was so striking as her gaiety—she was a mistress in the art of amusing others. That first drew my attention to her. Time flew when I was with her. I do not want to tire you, Audrey, with details. The plain truth of the matter is—I loved Elodie, while she cared less for me than she did for Captain Archer

Dighton. She loved him best; but he was poor and I was rich. I have often thought that, left to herself, she would have married Dighton, but Lady Danefield was always impressing upon her what a grand thing it would be to be Lady Villiers.

"She gave her no peace; no rest, added to which Elodie herself was ambitious. Dighton at that time was poor and without a prospect of ever being anything else. Poor child, if she had come to me and said, 'I love Archer Dighton best, but I cannot marry him because he has no money,' I should have respected her, I would have done anything to help them; but she was not frank—she married me for my money and title, knowing well in her heart that she loved Dighton best. I had never been jealous of him before marriage, and I was not likely to be so afterwards. We were very happy for a few months; it was a fool's paradise, I grant, but, as I did not know it, what did it matter? My wife—"

He noticed how Audrey shrank from the words, and he looked at her with a pleading wistfulness hard to bear.

"My wife," he resumed, "was very much liked. We came to London, and she was soon foremost amongst the leaders of fashion. Society spoiled her. Her least word was considered a prodigy of wit, her repartees were repeated, her laughing, beautiful face was welcomed everywhere—there was no one more popular in all London.

"It was then that Captain Dighton succeeded to a large fortune and came to town. He began to follow my wife at balls, parties, *fêtes*; in the Park, in the Row—everywhere he was at her side. At first I thought nothing of it. It seemed absurd to be jealous of an old friend of Elodie's. I took no notice of it until I saw people smile significantly when they were together, until I found that whoever invited Elodie invited Archer Dighton also. My blood boiled when I saw those significant looks and smiles. Still I was gentle with her, Audrey; she was young, and I loved her.

"At first I tried to change the state of affairs by keeping near her and declining the attentions of Captain Dighton. It was of no avail. They were much cleverer than I at ruses of all kinds. I determined at last to speak to my wife, to tell her that she was on the high-road to danger, that I was annoyed by the comments I heard, and that she must be more on her guard with Archer Dighton.

"Heaven knows, Audrey, I was gentle and patient with her. I could not have been kinder. But she was furious. She would not listen. She declared that she would talk to Captain Dighton when and as she liked—that the world might laugh as it would; she did not care—she would brook no interference. I call Heaven to witness, Audrey, that I was kind and gentle.

"Things went on from bad to worse, and again I was compelled to speak to her. This time she was more indignant; and she was foolish enough to tell me that she had never loved me, but had always cared for Archer Dighton. She was unwise enough to taunt me with the fact. She said many things that would have been better left unsaid. After that she openly defied me. She spent more time than ever with Captain Dighton.

"Still I did not despair. I said to myself that she was so young and easily influenced I would not lose my patience. I tried to surround her with people from whom she could learn nothing but good. And at length I spoke to Captain Dighton.

"He received my remonstrances with all the cool polish of a man of the world, thanked me, and took no more notice of them. After that one or two of my friends spoke to me about my wife in a manner that slightly startled me, and I saw that by some means or another the scandal must be ended at once. If Elodie would not listen to reason, then I must take her away from London.

"One night we were engaged to a ball at the Duchess of Quorn's—a grand ball to which half the *élite* of London had been invited. As we drove to Quorn House I determined to be very patient and gentle with Elodie. I knew that so many of her friends and of mine would be present that I

was anxious to avoid further scandal. I kissed her, and said:

"'Elodie, you will be very good and prudent to-night, will you not?'

"She looked up at me with a bright gleam of defiance in her eyes.

"'I shall do just as I please, Roche,' she answered. 'If I decide to talk all night with Captain Dighton, I shall do so.'

"'You will do nothing that is imprudent, I hope, Elodie,' I said.

"You see I was patient and forbearing unto the very last. Elodie was certainly the loveliest woman present in the ball-room. I always enjoyed the admiration she excited; but on this evening she made a greater sensation than ever. Audrey, she would dance with no one, talk with no one but Captain Dighton. I heard the Duke of Crofton ask her to dance with him. She pleaded an engagement, and waltzed with Archer Dighton. Even then I tried my best, Heaven knows, to cover her imprudence, but she left me with a defiant smile, and went into the conservatory with the Captain.

"It was the Duchess of Quorn who put the finishing stroke to my anxiety. She came to me in her kind fashion.

"'My dear Sir Roche,' she said, 'Elodie is young, and, like many of our young matrons, very thoughtless; would it not be as well to give her a hint that it is not quite prudent to linger so long in the conservatory? We know, of course, there is no blame to be attached to her, but it would be as well for you to give her a hint.'

"I thanked her Grace and went into the conservatory. The sight that met my eyes was not a pleasant one. My wife was seated amidst the ferns and flowers, and Captain Archer Dighton was bending over her chair; she was listening to him with a smile and a blush.

"'Elodie,' I said gently, 'you have been here so long, you will take cold.'

"She looked up into her companion's face.

"'I promised you the next dance, Captain Dighton,' she said, 'and I am ready to keep my promise.'

"She vouchsafed neither look nor word to me. I knew that the scandal would be increased if she began to dance with him again. I went up to her.

"'Let me have the pleasure of taking you back into the ball-room, Elodie,' I said. 'I am quite sure that Captain Dighton will excuse me when I tell him that I have something very important to say to you.'

"He bowed and left us. In brief stern words I told my wife what people were saying about her. She looked up at me with a white set face.

"'I told you that I should please myself!' she cried. 'Let me pass!'

"I saw her in all the insolent splendor of her beauty walk through the conservatory. I caught another glimpse of her an hour later; she was waltzing with Archer Dighton. I was powerless—I could not make a 'scene' in the ball-room. Audrey, that night she fled with him. At what time they left Quorn House no one knew. She sent me a note from London Bridge Station, but it merely said:

"'I always liked Dighton best, and now I am with him.'

"Another note came from the captain, saying that he was to be found at Paris. Elodie's flight was a nine days' wonder; but then everyone said they had always been quite sure that it would be so. Audrey, my true, faithful, loyal, loving wife, now tell me if I did wrong to free myself from a woman so light of love, so false of heart."

She did not answer him at once. She laid her hand upon his head.

"'My poor Roche,' she said gently, 'how you have suffered!' She forgot her own sorrows, for the time, in thinking of his.

"It is plain to you, Audrey, that I have suffered. You will not make me suffer more, will you, darling? You will not leave me—you will take pity on me? Answer me, Audrey—did I do wrong to free myself from the woman

who had wronged me—who had taken my true honest love and made a plaything of it—who had taken my heart and trampled on it—who took my name and—stained it—stained it, Audrey?"

She saw great drops of agony standing on his forehead; she saw his hands clench and his lips quiver.

"Stained it," he repeated, "my sweet innocent Audrey. Do you know all that that means? Do you understand it? Do you wonder that I took her picture from the walls—it had stood next to my mother's—and burned it? I locked up the rooms where her face had shone, and I said to myself that no other foot should tread them."

"I thought those were your mother's rooms," interposed Audrey.

"Yes, but they were hers too, Audrey. Tell me—did I do wrong to free myself from the woman who had been so cruel to me?"

He looked up into the sweet white face; he saw tears in the dark eyes, and he began to hope that he had prevailed.

"You were patient, Roche, but I think you might have been more patient; you were wise, but you might have been wiser; you were kind, but you might have been kinder. If you had seen your young wife in danger of death from burning, how quickly you would have snatched her from the flames! Danger for the soul is a thousand times worse than danger to the body; I cannot, therefore, hold you free from blame, even granting, Roche, that Elodie wronged you very cruelly. You might, perhaps, have been justified in living apart, but I do not see how you can excuse yourself for having married while she lived."

"The law had freed me from her," he answered firmly.

"That is a point on which we shall never agree," she said. "I have formed my opinion from the teaching of my own conscience, and I must abide by it. I grant that in certain cases husband and wife ought to part; but nothing shall ever make me believe that either of them can marry again while the other lives. I hold such a ceremony null and void. No man—no power of man—can part those whom God hath joined; and the oath taken is not to be kept until one or the other does wrong, but until death."

"You seem to forget that those who do wrong break their oaths of fidelity," he remarked.

"The breaking of one oath does not justify the breaking of another," she answered. "Roche, we lose time in talking; my conviction can never be altered. I do not know how to argue about it, but I have given you my belief. If I could even allow myself to remain here, I should be wretched, because I believe it to be wrong. I cannot remain—I must go away—and, what is still more, everyone must know why I go. If I have seemed to sanction that which I hold to be wrong, I must make my atonement as public as my fault."

Her eyes fell on the newspaper lying on the table. Suddenly she looked up at him.

"Damages, five thousand pounds," were the words she had seen.

"Roche," she asked, "what does this mean—'Damages, five thousand pounds'?"

"It means that Archer Dighton had to pay me five thousand pounds," he replied.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Pay you?" she said slowly. "I do not understand. He took your wife away; but why did he pay you this money?"

He made no answer. The horror and amazement deepened on her face.

"What was the money for, Roche? Explain—I do not understand. What did he give you the money for?"

"It was the fine that the law imposed on him," he said. His face flushed hotly as he uttered the words.

"A fine for what?" she asked.

"For having broken the law," he answered.

"I have heard of fines for poaching, for fighting, for drunkenness; but I did not know there was a fine for stealing a man's wife. Who received the money?"

"I did," he replied.

She rose slowly from her seat. She stood erect and haughty. He never forgot the lofty pride and contempt on her face.

"There are some things I cannot believe. This is one. Do you mean to tell me that you, Sir Roche Villiers, a man of honor, took knowingly five thousand pounds from the man who robbed you of your wife? Did you do it?"

"I did, Audrey," he answered.

A low bitter cry came from her lips.

"Why did you take it? What had money to do with the case? Was that the price of your wife's love—of your own fair name? I cannot understand it. Was it given to console you? Ten hundred thousand pounds would not have consoled me. Why did you take his money? If he had to be fined, why should not the fine have gone to the poor—to some charity? Why should it have come to you? It is like blood-money. I declare, I should have respected you more had you followed him and shot him, than I do after having taken his money."

"I never looked at it in that light," he answered.

"I would not have touched his money," she said, with superb contempt; "it would have blistered my fingers. I should have said to him, 'I will not stoop to take money; I have not sold my wife.'"

"But everyone, in all such cases, does it, Audrey."

"Everyone," she repeated, her eyes opening wide—"everyone! You do not mean to tell me that every husband who is unfortunate enough to lose his wife in this same unhappy fashion takes money of the man who has stolen her?"

"Most do," he answered.

Her face flushed, her dark eyes flashed.

"That only shows how false and wrong the whole thing is," she cried. "You appeal to the world—to the law. You confess to a broken heart—a ruined home—a blighted life; and they console you with the money of the man who has wronged you! Had I been in your place, Sir Roche, I would have cut off my hands rather than have touched Captain Dighton's money."

"I tell you, Audrey, it never occurred to me to look at it in that light."

"Tell me," she asked suddenly—"where is your wife living?"

"My wife is here," he said, touching her hand gently.

"Nay," she returned sadly. "I know not what name I bear before Heaven and in the sight of just men; but I am not your wife. Elodie is your lawful wife—no other. Death has not parted you. Tell me—where is she? What is she doing?"

"She lives in some little village on the sea-coast—Rookdene, in Kent, I believe."

"And where is Captain Dighton?"

"He did not stay many weeks with her; they disagreed, and he left her. I am not so hard as you think, Audrey. I allow her sufficient to live upon; but I have never seen her since, and never shall."

"Till death do us part," she said gently.

"No, even in death I would not see her. Audrey, my true wife, my dear love, tell me what you mean to do."

She took both his hands in hers and held them tightly clasped.

"I will tell you," she said sadly; "and remember, all argument will be quite useless—nothing can change my decision, because it is founded on what my conscience tells me is right. I shall go back home to my father this very day. I do not reproach you. I have not one hard or bitter word to say to you. Your notions of right and wrong differ from mine. Nothing could make me consider myself your wife while your true wife is living. I shall go home to my father, and stay with him."

"You will not be so cruel as to leave me!" he said.

"I am not cruel enough to remain," she answered slowly. "We will not talk of the sorrow; we must be brave and strong, and look the inevitable in the face. Roche,"

she pleaded, "there is one thing you must do—you must set me right with the world. If I had known the truth, I would rather have died than have married you. Most people must think that I married you while cognisant of the truth. When you can defend me, you must do so. You must tell everyone that, when I discovered the truth, I left you at once. Will you do me this justice?"

His voice was broken with sobs as he answered her, and her face was white as death.

"Will nothing induce or persuade you to alter your decision, Audrey?" he asked.

"No, nothing," she answered.

"Kiss me once—just once, dear," he sobbed.

She bent over him and kissed him. The hot tears fell from her eyes on to his cheek.

"Good-bye," she said gently—"good-bye, Roche."

Once again she touched his face with her lips, and then slowly—it seemed to him, as a vision fades—she quitted the room and left him alone.

Was he right or was she? He only knew that the pure, sweet woman he loved so well had gone from him.

CHAPTER XI.

IT was a fair spring day, and the sight of the newly-springing green leaves filled the Rector's simple happy mind with delight.

It was only the end of April, yet here in the old-fashioned Rectory garden—in a warm, sheltered sunny spot—some lilies of the valley were already in blossom.

He was so delighted that he could not rest until his wife had seen them. She looked at him with a smile.

"I wonder why it is," she said, "that lilies of all kinds make me think about Audrey—above all, the white Ascension lilies; but they are not in blossom yet."

Doctor Brooke was glancing around him with a well-pleased smile; the golden sunlight on the delicate green leaves was so charming.

"There is an abundant promise of fruit and flowers," he remarked to his wife; "the garden will look well this year. I wonder if Audrey will pay her long-promised visit home?"

Then Mrs. Brooke went on her round of visits, and the Rector went back to his library. He could not settle to his work so easily as usual; the spring sunshine tantalized him.

"I am worse than a boy," he said. "I shall have to shut out the sunshine altogether."

The words were still on his lips when the door opened, and, to his infinite surprise and wonder, he saw his daughter enter the room. He was too much astonished even for a word of greeting; but, when she came up to him, his surprise gave way to dismay. Her veil was thrown back, and he saw that her face was deadly pale, and that her eyes were dim with tears. She held out both her hands.

"Father," she said, "I have come home to you. I am in deep trouble and sore distress."

He took the trembling hands in his and held them tightly clasped.

"My dearest child, no matter what has happened, you have done well to come home."

Then they were silent for some minutes, the Rector waiting in sorrowful dismay for his daughter to speak, Audrey trying to collect her strength.

"I am in sore distress," she repeated—"oh, father, my marriage was no marriage—the man I love is not my husband!"

"My darling child, you tremble like a leaf! Sit down, Audrey, and tell me all."

"It was no marriage, papa, although he thinks it was. He is not my husband; he has a wife living from whom he has been divorced."

The Rector's face flushed angrily.

"A wife living, yet he dared to marry you, Audrey! The man is a villain!"

Then she became as anxious to defend him as she had been to leave him.

"You do not understand, papa. He is not a villain; he thought it was all right because he had obtained a divorce."

"I know nothing about divorces," said the Rector; "I only understand the Christianity of the matter. No man can have two wives; that is plain enough."

"He does not think so, papa; he fancies that the law has freed him from his first marriage, and that he was quite at liberty to contract another. That is the belief of many people."

"It is not mine, and it is not yours," he said quickly. "How strange, Audrey, that I had always a presentiment about this marriage of yours! I had always a fear that I did not like to express."

He walked rapidly up and down the room.

"It is strange that I have heard nothing of this," he said. "I made every inquiry about Sir Roche, and everyone gave him the highest of characters."

"He bears a high character," she rejoined quietly. "I believe this is his only fault; but then, papa, I find that everyone does not think as you and I think. There are many who honestly believe that a divorce frees from marriage ties, and leaves men and women free to marry again. Sir Roche believes it, and is honest in his belief. You know better—so do I."

"Tell me all about it, my darling," he said, looking at the white face from which the brilliant beauty seemed to have fled.

She told him all that had happened—of her refusal to associate with a *divorcee*; of Lady Glenarvon's letter—she felt quite sure that it had come from her; of her journey into the city to find the copy of the *Times*; of Sir Roche's dismay, and their farewell. Then she looked up at him.

"You must not think that because I tell you this quietly, papa, I have not suffered. My heart is broken; but I could not do wrong and live. You think I am right in my decision, papa?"

"I do, my darling," he said in a sorrowful voice.

"You think that I did right to leave him?" she asked.

"Yes, quite right, Audrey," he replied.

She drew nearer to him, and he saw how she trembled.

"Papa, tell me what you think yourself. Am I Roche's wife—his lawful wife—before God and man?"

He groaned aloud as he answered her; still he would say nothing but the truth.

"No, my child, I do not think you are," he said.

She threw up her arms in distress.

"What am I before Heaven," she cried—"what am I?"

"Innocent and guiltless," said the Rector. "You have not sinned; you have been sinned against."

"I must never go back to him," she said. "Papa, you must tell mamma—I cannot; my heart is breaking."

There was a slight sound at the door; turning, they saw Mrs. Brooke looking at them with wondering eyes.

"Audrey!" she cried; and the girl rose to go to her, and then fell helplessly to the ground.

The Rector raised her and laid her on the couch, and then told his wife her story.

"If we wished her well," he said, "we should almost pray that she might never open her eyes again."

"My beautiful child!" sobbed the poor mother. "What has she done, Fabian, that she should suffer like this?"

Then came days and nights of unutterable sorrow and distress for the saddened household, for Audrey lay sick unto death, and her parents felt that she would not recover. Sir Roche came down, but the Rector would not allow him to see his daughter.

"I am a Christian, sir," he said, "and so am bound to forgive you, but your deceit has slain my child. You will see her no more."

Sir Roche pleaded and prayed; he was so humble, so earnest, so persistent in declaring the honesty of his belief, that the Rector was touched at last.

"Why did you not tell us?" he said. "I cannot understand why you kept your first marriage a secret."

"I was afraid," he answered. "But my fear was not because I believed you would think my union with Audrey wrong. I thought you might be prejudiced against it."

A great deal of Doctor Brooke's anger faded away after this; he could not help feeling most profound pity for the man whose life had been so terribly blighted. They discussed the question in all its aspects, political, social, and religious; but the Rector kept his convictions, while those of Sir Roche were somewhat shaken.

The mother too forgave him when she saw how very dearly he loved her child—when she saw how keenly and bitterly he suffered; but both parents were firm in one respect—they would not allow him to see Audrey.

"It will be of no use," Mrs. Brooke told him; "you will only pain her, and to no purpose. You will never change her opinions or ours; leave her in peace."

There was nothing else for him but to go away, and, though they considered that he had deeply wronged their child, they could feel no anger against him, when they saw how ill and worn he looked.

Audrey had a hard fight for her life. The Ascension lilies were in bloom before she was able to get up. She referred but little to her trouble, but at times she looked at her mother and said:

"You must not think that I do not feel the separation because I do not speak of it—little sorrows find a voice, great ones are dumb."

She did feel it when the time came that she could be taken down stairs; when once more she was able to undertake the duties of life, they saw how sadly her sorrow had changed her. The doctor advised them to take her to the seaside.

One morning the Rector went into her room with an open newspaper in his hand.

"I thought it would comfort you, Audrey," he said, "to read this."

It was a well-written paragraph on divorces, and, as testimony to the fact how strongly some persons were opposed to them, the writer quoted the story of Lady Villiers.

He told briefly how she had married Sir Roche without knowing the history of his previous marriage and divorce, but that as soon as she had become acquainted with it she had left him.

There was no comment upon the case; the plain story was told, and persons could think what they would about it.

"Is that what you meant—what you wished, Audrey?" asked the Rector.

"Yes, papa," she answered, "that is the only *amende* that could be made, and I am glad that it has been made."

Then they went away to a beautiful breezy seaside spot, where the air soon brought a tinge of color to Audrey's face, and light to her eyes. When they had been there a month, Audrey said one day to her father:

"Papa, I have been thinking very much to-day about what is the best thing I can do with my life."

"Tell me what you have thought, Audrey?" he requested.

"It is spoiled," she continued, "so far as the desirable things of this world are concerned; for me there will never be husband, or home, or love. I have done no wrong, yet my fair name is tarnished. I have no position; I am neither wife nor widow. But a sweet thought has come to me—I discovered an object to which I can devote my life. I cannot give it to Sir Roche, but I may spend it for Sir Roche's wife. I must not love him—I may love her; and I am going to seek her, and try if I cannot place her by his side again."

"My dear child!" cried the Rector, aghast.

"My dear father, could I do a wiser, better, kinder or more generous deed?" she asked.

"Perhaps not; but—"

She did not allow him to finish the objection—she kissed it away.

Advice and remonstrance were alike vain. Not that the Rector really disapproved of his daughter's intentions; it was Quixotic—is was quite unworldly—it was even romantic—but it was to him a noble idea.

"Papa," she said, clinging to him eagerly, "of what use would it be to me to spend my whole life in vain regrets and lamentation? None. There is so little left that I can do. I cannot remain with you and return to the old life; I am ashamed. I cannot tell why, but I feel ashamed, as though I had done something wrong."

"It is a morbid, foolish feeling, my dear," remarked the Rector.

"I know it is; but I cannot quite help it. The position is a strange one. As the years pass on I shall grow accustomed to it, and shall not mind mixing with the world; just now I cannot. But the work I have proposed is lying ready to my hand."

"I will not object to it, Audrey; but I cannot say that I like your knowing such a person."

"I may do her good, papa; I will try. I will be kind, gentle, and loving to her. It seems to me that I owe her some atonement, and if I can in any way do her good, it will make me happier. She must have suffered a great deal. I have tried to call to mind all the things that could make me happy now, and this is the only practicable step. Let me take it, papa?"

So the matter was settled. Her sorrow and her illness had changed Audrey. She was a child when she was married; now the wisdom and experience, the thought of noble-womanhood, had come to her. The Rector felt no fear. She would do all that was wise, gentle, and true.

"The poor creature must be miserable enough," he said. "If you can do her any good, Audrey, go."

Audrey was most careful about everything. Her mother wept bitter tears when her daughter drew her wedding-ring from off her finger.

"I must not die wearing this, mamma," she said; "it is the symbol of an untruth. I should not like to be buried in it."

Mrs. Brooke took it from her with tears. She locked it away; and if Audrey thought of it, she never asked about it—the little ring in which so many hopes had centered. Another thing she was scrupulous about was her name. She would not allow anyone to address her as "Lady Villiers."

"To listen to that name in silence is to own my complicity in a sin," she would say. "I am not Lady Villiers, papa. By what name I am known before Heaven I cannot tell, but it cannot be that. The world may say what it will of me—I am Miss Brooke."

There were times when the Rector's eyes filled with tears as he thought of his daughter's case.

Life had this one charm left for Audrey—she would seek out Elodie, whose name and place she had so unconsciously taken, and then do her best.

She had arranged it all in her own mind. She would go to Rookdene, and there make the acquaintance of Elodie Villiers—then, when they were friends, the rest would be easy.

Neither her father nor her mother opposed her; they saw that her mind was fixed upon it.

One bright morning she started on her errand. Her first difficulty lay in the fact that she did not know the name at present borne by Elodie.

She would not be called Lady Villiers—that seemed quite certain; neither would she have resumed her maiden name. She trusted to chance to assist her.

Audrey was agreeably surprised on reaching the village of Rookdene. It was neither so small nor so obscure as she had expected; it bade fair to become a very flourishing watering-place in time.

There were a long street, some pretty outskirts, and rows of neat villas facing the sea; and there were one or two good hotels.

It was altogether far above the run of ordinary coast-

villages, and Audrey wondered that it should be called one.

At the railway-station her attention was drawn to the *Rookdene Weekly Gazette*, which professed to publish a list of visitors.

Some impulse prompted her to purchase a copy and look through the list of names. Amongst them was "Mrs. Dighton, No. 3, Medina Villas;" and as she read the words a shame-faced kind of wonder came to her. Could it be possible that Sir Roche's wife, Elodie, called herself by that name?

She drove to Medina Villas. They were a row of pretty houses facing the sea—bright little houses, with flowers in every window, and pretty gardens. By good fortune, as it seemed to her, No. 4 had a card in the window—"Apartments to Let."

"If it is Elodie who calls herself Mrs. Dighton, and she lives at No. 3," she said to herself, "I could not do better than take rooms at No. 4."

She told the driver to stop there; and, after a pleasant interview with the good-natured landlady, she agreed to take the pretty suite of rooms for some weeks at least.

"How long do you expect to remain, miss?" asked Mrs. Daites anxiously.

Audrey answered that it was quite uncertain; it might be weeks or months. The landlady however raised no objection; and Audrey dismissed the driver, and sent Mrs. Daites' servant with a request to the railway officials to forward her luggage.

CHAPTER XII.

AUDREY was in her pretty drawing-room overlooking the sea. She sat near the open window, watching the waves as they rolled in, the golden sands as they glowed wet in the sun, the little children as they played, the roses in the garden as they bent their fragrant heads, the pretty sprays of mignonette. A feeling of rest as well as loneliness came to her.

It was all so calm, so peaceful, so still. Since that fatal morning when she had read her husband's story her life seemed to have hurried on.

One event had rapidly succeeded another. Still she had never been alone; her gentle mother had always been near her.

Now she was a stranger in a strange spot. It seemed to her that she had never been alone before—had never known what real solitude was until now.

She almost forgot for the moment why she was there. Looking at the clear bright sky, many thoughts came to her.

Had she really done what was wisest and best? To her pure and steadfast soul came deadly doubts and temptations.

Had she done right to leave the man whom she loved so entirely? How he had pleaded with her! He had left his very soul, he said, in her hands.

He had prayed her to remain beside him, as though she were the good angel of his life. He had told her that his very hope of Heaven went with her. Would it not perhaps have been better to remain with him, and leave matters as they were?

She looked at the blue sky, but no answer came from it; the heavens were as brass. She looked at the restless sea; no voice came from the waves. Then she roused herself.

"I know that I have done right," she said; "no one may do evil that good may come."

Many were the conjectures formed in the village as to the beautiful lady with the sorrowful face who had come to No. 4, Medina Villas. She was not married—her name was Miss Brooke—and the gossips wondered amongst themselves whether she belonged to the Brookes of Devonshire or to the Brookes of Forest Dean. It was such a beautiful face, but so sad, so sorrowful. Everyone agreed that she must have had either a severe illness or some great trouble.

Audrey was very careful at the beginning of her inquiries. There was nothing that kindly Mrs. Daites liked better than a chat with her lodger. It was from her that Audrey heard first of the beautiful young widow, Mrs. Dighton. Yes, she was a widow, and she could not be more than twenty-five years of age. She had a beautiful face, but she was so restless.

"She came here first to inquire about my rooms, Miss Brooke," said the energetic little woman; "but I could not let mine for a permanency, having engaged with several families for our season. I recommended her to go next door, and she did. It would be a real charity for you to make friends with her, Miss Brooke," continued the kindly gossip, little dreaming that it was for that very purpose her lodger was there. "She knows no one; she goes nowhere; she leads a most solitary life."

"Perhaps she is not strong," said Audrey.

"No; of that I am quite sure. She is not strong. She was only in this house half an hour; but she gave me a strange impression. She was always looking at the door, as though she expected someone to enter. She trembled at every sound. It seemed so sad to see her young face with a widow's cap round it—so sad. She walks in the Square Garden every day. I see her in her long black dress and widow's cap. I always long to speak to her."

Audrey changed the subject; but she resolved none the less to seize the first opportunity of finding out whether the beautiful young widow and Elodie were the same.

The opportunity was not long in coming. At the back of Medina Villas was an enclosed piece of ground called the Square Garden. It was very prettily arranged, with seats and garden-chairs under the shade of the trees, and a green lawn in the middle for the children to play upon. Admission to the Square Garden was a patent of respectability in Rookdene; it was granted only to the inhabitants of Medina Villas and Trinity Square. Outsiders looked on with envy—certainly possession of those shady walks and beautiful flowers was to be envied. More than once Audrey had seen a tall graceful figure walking there—always alone—always, even when the sun shone brightest, with veiled face. She watched the stranger day after day. She spoke to no one—no one spoke to her; children avoided her; she never had a book with her; she sat, hour after hour, watching the tide, watching the swaying branches, her hands lying listlessly on her lap. She seemed so lonely, so sad, that Audrey's kind heart ached for her.

One morning Audrey, looking into the Square Garden, saw the tall dark figure with the trailing dress and the veiled face—not seated this time, but pacing restlessly up and down the long walk. Audrey knew that walk so well; she remembered hours when the fever of unrest would have killed her if she had not walked till it was quelled. Up and down the long path paced the stranger, never looking to the right or the left, never stopping for rest, a kind of madness born of the violence of repressed emotion evidently possessing her.

She never saw Audrey watching her with kindly eyes, she never saw the group of children at play, she never heard the song of the birds nor the distant murmur of the waves; restless, passionate anguish, sullen, fierce despair, it was plain, held her in bondage.

Suddenly a little paper kite came fluttering over the trees. A rosy, happy, laughing boy preceded it with shouts of joy. Audrey looked at him with a smile; the tall figure walked on quickly.

"Look at my kite!" shouted the child. "How high it is in the air! Oh, look, Mabel—look, Maud!"

A chorus of happy cries followed, and then the hapless kite fluttered and fluttered until it fell upon the veiled head of the tall lady.

"Oh, my kite!" cried the boy in despair. Audrey hurried to the rescue.

"Will you let me remove it?" she said to the stranger.

"The lady, startled by the sweet voice, stopped, and Audrey disentangled the kite and gave it to the boy.

"Thank you," said the stranger—and her voice was as sweet and gentle as Audrey's own.

She had been compelled to raise her veil, so that the kite might be disentangled, and Audrey saw a face that startled her, it was so full of passionate anguish and sorrow, so full of tragic despair.

Here was the chance she had longed for. Audrey was quick to embrace it. She said something about the beauty of the day, and the lady replied.

Then, with the sweet smile that had always made her one of the most attractive of women, Audrey said:

"I am very grateful to that little kite; it has rendered me a great service. I have been longing to speak to you, and it has given me the opportunity." Then, before the lady had time to turn away, she said quickly, "Let me introduce myself to you. I am a neighbor of yours. My name is Brooke—Miss Brooke. I live next door to you."

The sad eyes looked wistfully at her.

"Why should you wish to know me?" she asked.

"Because—pray do not be offended—your appearance interests me. You are too young to be sad."

"Young? Alas that anyone should call me young!" cried the lady, her lips trembling. "Young! Why, it seems to me that I have lived here twenty years!"

"You have had great sorrow?" interrogated Audrey.

"Sorrow?" she repeated, with a bitter little laugh. "That is a weak word."

"I wish you would let me be your friend," said Audrey. "I would gladly help you."

"My friend? I cannot—I can have no friend."

"Yes," said Audrey calmly, "you can have one—that is myself. Do not say 'No'; think the matter over. If after a few days you do not like me, I will never trouble you again; but I think you will if you try."

The bright beautiful eyes looked fearlessly into her face.

"It would be quite useless," she told her, "for me to make any friends; I am dying."

"Dying! Of what?" asked Audrey.

"I am dying of a disease that few people believe in," she answered. "Six years ago I should have laughed at it myself. I am dying of a broken heart."

Looking at her, Audrey felt inclined to believe it. There was a little flush on the lovely face—a light that was unearthly in the bright dark eyes. There was a strange, worn, tired look that struck her with keenest pain.

"A broken heart," said Audrey slowly and sadly—"that must be terrible. One must suffer much before that comes."

"I have suffered from pride—from love—from shame—from neglect; I have been driven mad by cruelty."

A flame like fire shone in her eyes as she uttered the words; and Audrey, taking the trembling hands, held them tightly clasped in her own.

"Has no one ever taught you," she said, "that there is a refuge in all distress—a comfort in all trouble—a hope when all other hope seems lost?"

"No; no one," she replied.

"Believe me, there is. No sin, no sorrow, can be too great, no heart too crushed, no soul too sad for this hope. If you could raise your eyes to it—a bright shining light all fair and gracious—earth with its sins and sorrows would be far from you; you would forget everything in its loveliness, and it would draw your love and sorrow all to itself."

"Not mine," she said with a bitter sigh. "You think you are talking to someone as good as yourself; you do not know me."

"Nor do you know me. That matters little. You are sad and sorrowful. I wish to comfort you—to show you light in the darkness—to tell you that he who has lost this world has lost but little, but that he who loses Heaven loses all. If you have lost all the world, Heaven remains."

"I know nothing about Heaven," was the moody reply. "It is the place for good people—not for me."

"For good people, yes; but there are two kinds of brightness there—the radiance of the innocent who have never

sinned, and the brightness of those who, having sinned, have repented exceedingly."

"No one has ever talked to me in this way before. Who are you?" said the stranger.

"My name is Audrey Brooke," was the smiling answer; and then, seeing that her words had gone home, the Rector's daughter would not mar their effect by repetition. With the tact that never failed her she changed the conversation.

"My name," said the strange lady, "is—Mrs. Dighton." Her face flushed hotly as she spoke, and then the color faded, leaving it marble-white. "My—my husband was in the army," she added—"now I am alone. I have been staying here some time." Then the white lips quivered. Nothing but kindly pity shone in the face of Audrey Brooke.

"You will let me join you sometimes when you are in the Square Garden, Mrs Dighton?" she said gently—and she did not know until she uttered the name how great was her dislike and repugnance to it. Why had Elodie ever taken that name? The stranger looked up in wonder when she detected the hesitation in the sweet voice; no idea came to her of what had caused it.

"It is not good for anyone to be so entirely alone," continued Audrey; "it will cheer both you and me if you will let me join you here sometimes."

As she was speaking the boy with the kite ran up to them and held up his little face for a kiss. Audrey bent down with a few laughing words and kissed him. Elodie drew back with a shudder.

"I do not like children," she said quickly.

"Nay," returned Audrey, "I am sure that cannot be true. You have not the face of one who dislikes children."

"I would rather not kiss one," said Elodie hastily; and the child, chilled by the tone and the words, ran away.

Mrs. Dighton did not hold out her hand in farewell, leaving Audrey perplexed as to whether she had pleased her.

"I must persist until I succeed," she thought. "Constant dropping wears away the stone. I will care for her, and talk to her until I wear away her reserve and make her love me."

She kept to her resolution. There were times when Mrs. Dighton turned from her with a gesture which meant that she could not speak; and then Audrey would walk on patiently, never feeling in the least hurt or offended.

One day she saw her with her face quite unveiled, and its marvellous beauty struck her with wonder; the low white brow, the golden hair, the dark gray eyes, and the perfect mouth pleased her.

It was a good face, although poor Elodie had gone so painfully wrong. It looked like the face of one easily influenced, easily persuaded, but not wilfully wicked.

As Audrey gazed at her the words which came into her mind were the old ones of the sword wearing out the scabbard; the fret and torment of the soul were evidently wearing out Elodie's fragile body.

She was so thin, so worn, so shadowy. "She must have been exquisitely beautiful a short time since," thought Audrey; "no wonder Roche loved her—no wonder the loss of her made him bitter and proud and hard."

Then she wondered again, as she had wondered a hundred times, how anyone could leave Roche, who was still her chief amongst men.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MONTH had passed since that first meeting in the Square Garden. For several days Audrey had seen nothing of Mrs. Dighton; she was not much surprised therefore when Mrs. Dailes told her that the lady next door was very ill.

"They call it low fever," said the little landlady, "but I know it is the heat of the weather that is affecting her. This heat would kill anyone."

"I must go and see her," thought Audrey; "now is my opportunity."

She sent to ask if she might call upon her. The first answer was "No."

Then she sent in a basket of fruit and flowers, asking if she might visit her for only five minutes; the answer was—if she pleased.

Audrey soon found herself in Elodie's little drawing-room. The window was wide open, and a little couch was drawn near to it.

On it lay Elodie. She looked terribly ill. Audrey hastened to her. She waited for no words of greeting, but, bending down by the little couch, she kissed the lovely face.

"Why did you not let me come before?" she said. "I have been longing to be with you."

"I knew that if you came you would stay; you are always so kind to me," replied Elodie.

"Why should I not stay?" asked Audrey.

The delicate face flushed, and the gray eyes filled with tears. Elodie's hot hands clasped Audrey's.

"I will tell you," she said. "I should like above all things to have you for my friend—I should think it the greatest blessing that had befallen me; but I cannot deceive you—I must tell you the truth—and when you know it you will not care to be my friend."

"On the contrary, I shall care more than ever," declared Audrey; "there is no story that you could tell me which would make me care less for you, or feel less anxious to be your friend. Put me to the test."

"I wish I could; I should like a friend. Your face is bent so kindly over me, your eyes smile, and your lips say such gentle words; do you know that in all my life no woman's face has ever bent so kindly over me? I had no sisters, and my mother died when I was young. No woman's face has ever smiled upon me; and you will turn from me when you hear my story."

"Put me to the test," said Audrey cheerfully.

The trembling hands clung to her, the white face turned to her, the troubled eyes filled with tears.

"I will tell you all," she responded, "and, if you do not turn from me, it will be because you are different from others, with a sweet wisdom that I do not understand. I shall watch your face while I am speaking; if it changes, if it turns from me, I shall know that you have condemned me. I am not Mrs. Dighton, I am not even a widow. My husband is still living, but I ran away from him."

The weeping eyes looked eagerly to see if Audrey turned away, but, bending down, the Rector's daughter kissed the troubled face.

"You do not hate me then? Oh, Heaven, is there one creature left in the world whom I can call friend? I will tell you all my story," she continued—"it is a sad one. My mother died while I was very young, and no good woman trained me. That was the beginning of evil for me—no good woman trained me, no one ever talked to me of right or wrong. My aunt, Lady Danefield, adopted me; and she had but one idea, and that was that I must make the best use of my beauty and marry the richest man who sought my hand. That was my education, my training—I might almost say, my religion. Of self-control, discipline, self-sacrifice, I never heard; of religion, as you understand it, I never heard; self, self-indulgence, was the beginning and end of all my teaching. I was both proud and ambitious in those days; I longed for a grand position, for a high place in the world. Ah me! I had two lovers; one was Captain Archer Dighton, whom I loved very dearly; the other, Sir Roche Villiers. Why do you tremble? Have I startled you?"

"No," said the sweet voice; "go on, dear."

"If I had been left to myself, I should have married Captain Dighton. I loved him very dearly; but he was poor, so poor that it was with difficulty he kept a place in society."

"Sir Roche was rich, wonderfully rich, and my aunt never gave me a moment's peace. But let me give myself all blame. I was proud and ambitious; it would be a grand thing, I thought, to be Lady Villiers of Rowan. Are you disturbed by my story?"

Again the sweet face bent over her and the soft voice whispered to her to go on.

"I married Sir Roche," said Elodie, "and, though I did love him, I had the greatest possible respect for him. He was good, true, loyal, a gentleman and a scholar. He was good in every sense of the word; if he had a fault, it was that he was proud, and did not easily forgive. He loved me very much."

"Ah, when I think of the wasted treasure of love lavished on me, I know how I have sinned! We were very happy at first, I enjoyed the novelty of wealth and high position. We should have been happy now, but that I met Captain Dighton when Sir Roche took me to town for the season."

"He had just come into possession of a large fortune, and the first thing he said to me was that it had come too late. Too late—ah me, if I had been wise, if I had been sensible, that one speech would have put me on my guard, and with bitter words I should have dismissed the tempter. I am not going to excuse myself—I have no excuse to offer—but, if I had had one true friend, if my husband had been one degree kinder or less proud, my fate would have been different—I should not have done what I did. I will not blame others. I was vain, proud; I disliked control; I would not brook interference."

"Captain Dighton knew all my faults; he played upon them. Sir Roche was kind at first; he saw the Captain always with me, and said nothing. I think he was too strictly just, pure, and honorable in himself to suspect the want of such qualities in others. Then people began to talk about us, and he grew sterner. He spoke to me several times about Archer Dighton, but I defied him."

"I refused to listen to him; I was insolent in my disdain. I would not be corrected or advised. Archer Dighton encouraged me in all this; he set me against my husband. He told me that every gossip in London was privileged to speak to Sir Roche about his wife; he advised me to resent it."

"He said no woman of any spirit would submit to such a thing. How foolish I was to listen, for all the time I had much affection and respect for my own husband! Things went on from bad to worse. Sir Roche became sterner and prouder; he vexed me, watched me, annoyed me."

"Archer Dighton soothed, flattered, and pleased me. One fatal night we went to a ball at Quorn House. I had no more thought of acting wickedly than you have now; but everything went wrong. Captain Dighton flattered me until I think I must have become mad. There were one or two very unpleasant scenes."

"You will never be allowed to meet me again," said the captain; "your husband looks as cross as only a British husband can look."

"Ah me! He bewildered me with flattery, with sarcasm, with satire. When the evening was drawing to a close, he said to me:

"My beautiful Elodie, do not go back to that hateful bondage, to the tyrant who delights in showing his power over you. Come with me."

"I went. It is a common story—sad enough for a tragedy. You do not turn from me? Heaven bless you forever and ever! You think I was easily tempted?"

"I was so young—I knew so little; if one hand had touched my shoulder, if one voice had whispered in my ear, 'Stop—think of what you are doing,' I should not have gone. I only thought how vexed Sir Roche would be, how it would punish him for having scolded me. I never thought of myself, of my blighted life, my lost name—never at all, believe me; I was so young and so thoughtless."

"I was only one week with Captain Dighton. He took me to Paris, and then I awoke to a sense of what I had done."

In one week I had found out his true character. It was selfish, utterly heartless, utterly without principle, utterly without honor. My heart rose in hot rebellion against him, and I longed to be again with the noble loyal man whose life I had blighted.

"Then I realized that by one act of mad folly I had lost my position, my name, all that was of value in the world. I had placed a barrier between myself and my old life. I had lost all. Only Heaven knows what that awakening was like. In one week we quarreled, and I left Captain Dighton.

"I came hither, not knowing whither to go or what to do. I am called Mrs. Dighton here because unhappily my trunks and my letters bore that name; I did not dare to change it. After a time a mad hope came to me. I said to myself that my husband was a just man; that his wrath and anger were reasonable; that I had outraged and insulted him—yet that surely, when he knew how I had repented, he would forgive me. I resolved that I would live here in seclusion year after year, until I had lived down my sin, and then he would surely forgive me.

"It was such a foolish, futile hope. I can give you no stronger proof of how utterly foolish I was than in telling you this belief of mine—that Sir Roche would forgive me. I wrote him letters full of such passionate sorrow and anguish that I believe, had he read one, he would have relented.

"But he never read them; they all came back to me unopened; and then I knew he was seeking a divorce from me. I made no defence; what could I say? The divorce was granted. Captain Dighton's rage, when he found that he had a large sum of money to pay, was something fearful. I will not tell you of the letters he wrote, or what he said. I will tell you about myself.

"It came to me like a thunderbolt—the knowledge that I was no longer Sir Roche's wife. I could not believe it or realize it. I could not understand it. If I had been condemned to imprisonment, there would have been reason in it. In the madness of my foolish youth I had sinned, and I deserved to suffer for it; but that we two should still be living, yet no longer husband and wife—I could not understand it.

"My solicitor told me that I was free to marry again. How could that be, when my heart was breaking with sorrow that I had sinned against Sir Roche? I declare to you that for months I was utterly stunned. I could not realize that I was not Sir Roche's wife. Still even then I did not lose heart. I thought that, though Sir Roche had done this, he had perhaps only done it to justify himself. For all that I knew, it might have been the custom—he might have been compelled to do so; but he would forgive me in the years to come, when he saw how I repented—how I lived, in solitude, in seclusion, hoping always to win his pardon and regain his affection. I said to myself, 'When he sees that I forget everything but him, he will forgive me.' For five long years I lived in these little rooms, striving to win back the love I had lost, the position I had forfeited; and one day Sir Roche's solicitor came to see me. Heaven grant that no creature living may ever feel the same pang of disappointment that I felt! I had but one thought, my repentance was accepted at last, the time of my penance was over. I had lived down my sin, my husband was going to forgive me. I thought all these things—none of them were true. The solicitor had come to make some more permanent arrangement about the income that Sir Roche allowed me, and to tell me that Sir Roche was married.

"To whom?" I asked; and the lawyer looked alarmed. "That does not concern you, madam," he answered.

"Tell me," I cried, "the name of the woman who has dared to take my name and my place!"

"I must remind you, madam, that you have forfeited both," he said, with a low bow; "neither one nor the other belongs to you now."

"Since then I have despaired. I was so young and so thoughtless when I did that reckless deed. I think Sir Roche might have forgiven me when I had atoned for it by years of repentance. Now I can only die of my despair. You do not turn from me?"

"No," said Audrey, and she drew the golden head down until it rested on her breast. "The sin was great; I recoil from that. It was a great, grievous, foolish sin; it seems to me to have no excuse. You were not driven to it by unkindness; nor even by the greatness of your love for another."

"No; ten minutes beforehand I had not thought of it," declared Elodie.

"Now you have suffered very cruelly. But there must be suffering where there is sin; they always go together."

Elodie raised her golden head; the flush had died from her face, leaving it marble-white.

"There is one person," she said, whom I will never forgive. I forgive Archer Dighton, who spoiled my life. I forgive Sir Roche, who has been so hard and cruel, who has judged me without mercy, who has refused to pardon me; I forgive the aunt who neglected me and filled my mind with ideas that were all wrong.

"But I will never forgive the woman who married my husband—who took the place that I might have regained but for her. You tremble! Ah, my story has angered you! I cannot forgive her. How could any woman marry a man whose wife was still living and seeking his forgiveness? I do not know whether she was rich or poor, whether she was noble or plebeian; but I hate her!"

She paused a few minutes, for Audrey's face had grown very pale.

"You cannot conceive," she said, "how I hate her. I think so much of Rowan, for I was very happy there. I picture her in the rooms I loved, wearing the jewels I wore, taking my place, the servants all calling her 'Lady Villiers.' I can imagine Sir Roche going to consult her, and I hate her.

"I know that I am dying.

"Doctor Borat told me this morning that my life was a matter of days unless I could control the nervous fever that is killing me. I cannot control it, for I am always thinking of her who dares to call herself Lady Villiers while I live. Granting that I forfeited my place, still he has no right to put any one else in it. I hate her!"

"Perhaps she did not know," remarked Audrey, gently—"it is possible that she did not know—Sir Roche had been married."

"She must have known—every one knew; my portrait hangs in the gallery at Rowan."

Audrey did not tell her that it had been burnt.

"Sir Roche stripped my rooms; he sent everything to me that had once belonged to me. But I noticed that he did not send my portrait. You do not know how my hopes rested on that; he kept that by him."

Audrey remembered the pitiless voice that had said: "I tore her portrait from the walls and burnt it."

"Perhaps," continued the feeble voice, "this person whom they call by my name has ordered it to be taken away. I shall never see Rowan again now that she is there."

The sweet face bent more kindly over her, the gentle voice whispered more gently:

"I have something to tell you about this lady. I know her."

The golden head and white face were raised quickly, and then fell again.

"You know her?" interrogated Elodie. "Tell me about her."

"I will tell you all I know," said Audrey. "To begin, she never was half so fair as you. She was quite a simple girl, a clergyman's daughter, and knew nothing of the world.

"She had never heard of Sir Roche, and she had never seen him until she met him at a friend's house; there they fell in love with each other, and Sir Roche asked her to be his.

"He never told her that he had been divorced from his wife—she never dreamed of such a thing. He had taken every precaution too that she should not know it.

"The servants at Rowan were changed; there was no way in which she could know it. If anyone inadvertently spoke of Lady Villiers, she, poor child, thought they meant Sir Roche's mother. She was a simple girl, and she loved Sir Roche very dearly.

"At last, quite suddenly—without any warning—the story of Sir Roche's marriage and divorce was brought home to her.

"At first she was incredulous; she would not believe it. She went to him and spoke to him about it. He said that it was true—every word of it.

"She did not upbraid him; she told him the simple truth—that she never had believed in divorce, and never should—that the notion of it was altogether against her conscience, altogether wrong. And she left him that same day. She gave up wealth, position, name—above all, his love and her happiness—for her conscience's sake, and she went back home to her father's house. Now do you hate her?"

Hot tears fell on the white face.

"No—not now," she said; "she is a noble woman."

Audrey went on in a lower voice:

"She took her wedding-ring from her finger, and she forbade anyone to call her Lady Villiers. She made no compromise, but she cast herself off entirely from the life she loved.

"Then for a long time she was very ill—lying between life and death. You will not wonder at that—it was a terrible wrench for her. When she recovered, she was almost afraid at first of facing her new life. Then an idea came to her—Heaven sent it. She was thinking one morning what she could do with her spoiled and blighted life. She said to herself, 'There must be one other woman on the face of the earth just as unhappy as I am myself, and that is Elodie. I will go and find her; I will try and cheer and comfort her. I will make amends to her for the unconscious injury I have inflicted upon her.'

"She is a noble woman," repeated Elodie.

"She carried out her idea," said Audrey. "She left home again, but this time it was to seek out her whom the world had forgotten."

She clasped her tender arms around the trembling figure, and touched the pale face with her lips. "You do not hate me now, Elodie, do you?" she asked gently.

"Was it you? I am not surprised. I have always felt that you were different from the rest of the world—that you were more than an ordinary friend to me. No, I do not hate you—I love you with all my heart!"

The sweet gentle girl encircled the shrinking trembling figure with her arms. She laid the tired head lovingly on her breast, and forgot her own sorrows and wrongs in the sorrow of the unhappy lady before her.

"I feel, Elodie, that I have a claim upon you. I shall stay with you and nurse you until you are well again."

"I shall never be well," said Elodie; "but I shall be happy. It will be like another life. How wonderful it all seems! And you were strong enough to do that—to leave him—to give up Rowan? I wish—oh, how I wish that I had been more like you! Tell me about Rowan. I loved the place so much."

Audrey talked to her until the golden head drooped and the tired eyes were closed in slumber.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE burning summer heat had passed, the corn had been gathered in, the fruit had been plucked from the trees, and the lovely earth lay resting in the sunlight of autumn. The sea was full of deep melodies.

Audrey spent whole hours in listening to its music. One bright morning she was lying quite still, watching the waves.

She was so changed that she looked like another Elodie. The despair and unrest had left her; her face was calm, sweet and sad. She was worn to a shadow; but her eyes were still bright.

Her true and faithful nurse—the one sincere friend to whom she owed everything—stood by her side watching every look.

No mother could have been kinder—no sister more tender. Suddenly the dark eyes opened and looked at her.

"Audrey," she said, "I should like to see him once more—just to tell him that I am sorry for the past, and hear him say that he forgives me. Would he come if you asked him?"

There was something so wistful in the pleading voice that Audrey's eyes filled with tears.

"I am sure he will not refuse," she replied.

Lest there should be any error, she went herself at once to the telegraph-office and sent a telegram to him. It ran thus:

"From Audrey Brooke, Rookdene, to Sir Roche Villiers, Rowan Abbey, King's Wynne. Come to me at once, without fail; you are particularly wanted."

She knew that he loved her so well, that if she had asked him to go to the other end of the world for her, he would have done it.

The moment Sir Roche read her summons he started for Rookdene. He did not know why Audrey wanted him; but he had some vague idea that it was in relation to unfortunate Elodie.

No matter what it was, he must obey her. He traveled incessantly, yet it was evening before he reached Medina Villas.

He had never seen Audrey since that terrible hour in which she had parted from him, when they had stood face to face with the story of his first marriage between them. His heart beat, his strong form trembled, and his face blanched as he stood in the little drawing-room waiting for her.

She came in, tall, slender, and graceful, with the same pure face, the same sweet smile, and he could have knelt and kissed the hem of her dress. When the clear light of the pure eyes fell upon him, a great tearless sob rose to his lips, a great shudder passed over him. She held out her hand to him in kindly greeting.

"You are very good to come so quickly," she said; and then there was a few minutes' embarrassed silence. Audrey, with her quick woman's tact, was the first to break it.

"You will have guessed perhaps why I sent to you," she said; "Elodie is dying, and she wanted to see you once more."

"Are you staying with her?" he asked.

"I have been here since June," she answered. "How good you are, Audrey—how noble, how unselfish! Your father wrote me and told me whither you were going, and with what idea you had begun another life."

"We will not talk about it," she said, gently. "Elodie was alone in the world, and quite forgotten. I found her in despair; now she is calm and tranquil, and ready to die. That is better than to have worn away my life in useless lamentation or in sullen gloom; there is something in it that fits my notion of justice. Roche, you will be very kind to her? I have learned to love her very dearly."

He looked slightly embarrassed.

"I do not see what is to be gained by seeing her, Audrey," he began, "unless you really wish it."

"I do really wish it," she said, firmly. "She will die happier for having seen you and heard you say that you forgive her."

"I will do it," he replied, "no matter what it costs me."

He sat down, and Audrey told him all about Elodie's illness, and how the doctors said she was really dying of a broken heart.

At first there was no definite malady; it was the fret and fever of the unhappy soul, the grief, the despair, the baffled love and pride, the lost ambition, that wore the fragile body away. Lately a nervous fever had set in; and of that Elodie was dying.

Sir Roche was not ashamed of the tears that rained down his face, of the sobs that he could not conceal, when Audrey told him all the pathetic details of the lonely life, and how Elodie had been hoping always that he would forgive her. There was a light not all of earth on her face; her words were sweet and wise.

When she had finished speaking, she said to him:

"It is too late for you to see her this evening, Roche; come back in the morning, and I will take you to her."

Without another word he took her hand, kissed it, and left her.

The sun shone brightly the next morning when Sir Roche found himself in the little drawing-room at No. 4, Medina Villas. He was startled when Audrey came in to him.

She had been sitting up all night; her face was pale, her eyes had a worn look. She seemed weary, yet she held out her hand with a smile to Sir Roche.

"I am so glad you are come," she said. "Elodie has been talking about you. She has not many hours to live. Come with me to see her."

They went together. Sir Roche had never seen the hapless lady since the night of the ball at Quorn House. He remembered his last glimpse of her—her bright, beautiful face, with its defiant look; the luster of her diamonds; the sheen of her brilliant dress. Now he saw her again—a pale, shadowy, dying creature, whom the weight of her own sin had crushed.

He was deeply touched; all memory of his own wrong died away. He went up to her, and kneeling down by her side, uttered her name softly.

She was startled at first. She raised her thin hands, and tried to hide her face from him; but Audrey drew them away.

"Be kind to her, Roche," she whispered; "see what she has suffered."

He did as she wished. He stooped forward and kissed the thin, wasted face.

"Elodie," he said, "I am sorry to find you so ill."

"My sin has killed me, Roche," she answered. "How good you were to come to me! I want to hear you say that you forgive me." Her face flushed as she continued—"I should like to get up and kneel down before you to beg your forgiveness; but I cannot. Listen to me for a moment, Roche. I never meant to do wrong—I had never even thought of it. It was not deliberate or intentional—it was not indeed. I was thoughtless, but I was not wicked, and I

have repented until my sin has killed me. Say you forgive me, Roche."

He laid his hand on the golden head.

"I forgive you, even as I pray Heaven to forgive you."

"Will you call me 'wife' once more, Roche—once more, for I loved you very dearly?"

He looked at Audrey, and there was a moment's silence. Then Audrey went up to him, with the same bright light on her face.

"Do what she asks you, Roche," she said gently. And he, bending gently over the white face, said:

"My dear wife!"

The two that stood near her will never forget the flush of startled joy on her face.

"Thank you, Roche. May I die with my head upon your breast?" Then she took Audrey's hand, and kissed it. "It is to you, oh, true and dear friend," she said, "that I owe all!"

Two hours afterward the noonday sun was pouring a flood of light into the room, and the music of the waves was borne on the wind.

The end was very near. The doctors had gone away; and Elodie lay dying, with the truest friends woman ever had near her.

Once they had bent over her, thinking her eyes closed forever; but a sunbeam fell across her face, and she opened them.

She was dying as she had asked to die, with her head on her husband's breast, and Audrey by her side. Suddenly she looked up at him and smiled, and with that the spirit took its flight.

Sir Roche was not ashamed to weep bitter tears over her—to accuse himself of being hard and cold—to fold the tired hands over the quiet heart—while Audrey stood by weeping. Presently he looked at her.

"I should like to thank you in her name, Audrey," he said. But she held up her hand.

"I will have no thanks," she returned. "I have simply done my duty."

She took her place by the side of the dead.

"Roche," she said gently, "I want you to give me your hand."

She took it in her own, and laid it on the still breast.

"I want you," she added, "to promise me two things."

"I will promise anything you ask," he replied.

"Promise me, first, that on her grave-stone you will place the name of your wife, Elodie Villiers."

"I promise," he answered.

"Secondly, here in her presence, promise that you will send back to that man his miserable money; that you will tell him that the woman whose life he blighted is dead; and that, fearing his money might bring a curse with it, you have sent it back. Will you do this?"

"Most assuredly I will," he replied. "You are right in this, Audrey, as you are in everything else. I will do it at once."

Then Audrey bent down and kissed the dead face.

"My work here is done," she said; "I will go home. And you, Roche, who have recognized her in death, you will give her the last honor you can pay her. Elodie," she cried, laying her fresh sweet lips on the dead ones, "Elodie, now I shall not fear to meet you hereafter!"

She went home—her work was done—and Sir Roche remained. He paid all honor to Elodie. He did not take her back to the stately mausoleum where so many women of his race slept.

She was buried in the pretty churchyard by the sea at Rookdene, and on the white marble monument was inscribed the simple words:

"In loving memory of Elodie, Lady Villiers, aged 25."

In death, though not in life, she found her lost name again.

A year passed. Audrey spent it at home, Sir Roche in restless wandering, wondering always whether he should ever win for himself again that precious pearl of womanhood.

He was afraid to ask Audrey to return to him. During the year he had written to her but five or six times, and they were merely friendly letters; yet his whole soul was longing for her—he could find no rest by night or by day for thinking of her.

At last he summoned up courage, and went to Holmesdale. The Rector and his wife received him kindly; but they looked grave when he asked to see Audrey, and to see her alone.

She must have expected him; for she betrayed no surprise—she offered no comment. She went to him in the library, where, so many years before, she had read the words of the

marriage-service. She looked up at him with a smile that seemed to him unusually sweet.

"You have come for me, Roche," she said.

"I am willing to go back with you."

"Mamma," she said, a few hours afterwards, "will you give me my wedding-ring? I shall want it to-morrow morning."

And on the morrow they went through the solemn service together again.

Audrey wished that the whole story should remain unrevealed; but it did not, on the contrary, it found its way into the newspapers, and all England was touched by it.

For the newspapers told it all—how she had given up wealth, home, love and luxury for conscience's sake; how she had devoted herself to one who was more unhappy than herself; how she had nursed the hapless lady through a long illness, had soothed her death, had reconciled her to Sir Roche, and thus had, humanly, saved her. They called her a pearl amongst women—they wished that more were like her.

Then she took her place again in the great world. A good influence seemed to emanate from her—the spell of goodness and purity lingered round her—only kind words and thoughts could live in her sweet presence. Before her evil and wickedness seemed to fly.

Bright-haired children grew round her; but neither she nor Sir Roche ever forgot Elodie. They went every year to her grave, and the only time that Lady Villiers ever thought her husband harsh was one July morning when they stood by Elodie's grave together. The man who had charge of it had planted white Ascension lilies on it.

"Take them away," said Sir Roche; "you may have roses, or passion-flowers, or any other flowers that bloom, but not these."

She looked up at him.

"Why do you say that, Roche?" she asked.

"They are out of place, for one thing, Audrey. Another reason is, they are your favorite flowers, and I do not like to see them there."

So the white lilies were taken away. But Audrey soon forgot that one instance of sternness. No husband was kinder, more devoted, better than hers. They loved each other with a true and perfect love that no man could put asunder.

THE END.

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